

# イリヤの空 UF<sup>そのイ</sup>Oの夏



秋山瑞人

ILLUSTRATION ● 胸都えーじ

 電撃文庫

# Iriya no Sora, UFO no Natsu

## vol.1

by Akiyama Mizuhito

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# Chapter 1 – Close Encounter with the Third Kind

## (Part 1)

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“It feels extremely good, you know,” someone had said.

That was why he too decided to do it.

On the way home from deep in the mountains, Asaba Naoyuki had the thought of sneaking into the school’s pool to have a swim.

It was about 6:05 PM on the last day of summer vacation in his second year of middle school. He parked his bicycle at a nearby video store, shouldered his almost-bursting duffel bag, and walked along a scarcely-lit path back to school.

After climbing over the north-facing side gate, he walked briskly behind the row of clubrooms.

He was starting to feel like a spy infiltrating enemy territory as he surreptitiously glanced around while hidden in the shadow of the incinerator. The school grounds were vast; it was the only redeeming feature of a school in a rural area, on which an unskillful person from some department had drawn indistinct, squiggly white lines which had been thoroughly trampled on for the entirety of this summer.

To his eyes, which hadn’t gotten accustomed to the dark yet, they resembled the Nazca geoglyphs.

On his right was an old, tired-looking gymnasium, and in front of him was a timber structure, the main building of Sonohara Town Ritsuenbara Middle School. The building was so old and musty that it exuded character. On his left was the newest addition to school, Sonohara District’s fourth air raid shelter.

It was dark. Naturally, there was not a soul around him. Distant sounds were surprisingly distinct. He could hear the non-stop ringing of a telephone, the wailing siren of a patrol car chasing after something, the sounds of the engine of a moped revving up in the distance, and a vending machine thanking someone for buying juice from it.

Entering his line of sight was a circle, within which the character 'Buddha' was painted in red, towering abruptly in the night sky. It was a billboard that was recently put up for a store selling Buddhist altars on the outskirts of town. It soured his mood somewhat, so he pretended not to see it.

The clock tower rising from the center of the school building indicated that it was 8:14 PM.

It wasn't just any 8:14 PM.

It was 8:14 PM on the last day of summer vacation in his second year of middle school.

To Asaba, who hadn't even touched any of his homework, the clock tower on the school building, which divided the school grounds and cut upwards into the summer sky, was nothing more than a wooden, three-storied ticking time-bomb. He detested that clock tower. He had a feeling that if he could stop the cogs in that clock tower from turning, he could stop the entire world's time at 8:14 PM.

If that happened, summer vacation would never end. The second trimester would never begin. For the past month and a half, even though the only people who looked up at the dial of that clock were probably boys with buzz cuts from sports clubs, even though no one would know even if they skipped out on training a little, even though there was no second hand on the clock, that clock tower had been, second by second, chipping away at the eternity that was the past month and a half.

And now, all Asaba had left was less than thirteen hours.

Thirteen more hours and *boom*, the second trimester would commence, without mercy. Kawaguchi Taizou, single and thirty-five years of age, science teacher and homeroom teacher of Class 2-4, would make anyone who couldn't hand in their homework stand in a line on the podium. He would glower at them with that objective, scientific look in his eyes while systematically smacking the row of heads one by one with his attendance book, demanding a logical excuse as to why they couldn't hand in their homework.

—but *sensei*, it couldn't be helped. I was abducted by aliens on the first day of summer vacation and was taken to a pyramid on the far side of the moon. That

pyramid was their secret base from which they plan to invade Earth, and the prison facility at which I was forced into also held seven other boys and girls from around the world, who were also there against their will. We broke out of that prison facility, snatched away their laser guns and after going on a rampage, managed to destroy the pyramid and escape in a UFO, only to finally reach Earth last night. I had no time to do my homework, but because of what we did we were able to save humanity from being wiped out, which is why I am here with you today, *sensei*. Ah, no, this isn't sunburn. It's exposure to the radiation from an anti-gravity field. See, look closely, it's just like in the tragedy of the Lucky Dragon No. 5<sup>1</sup>, right?

Surely he would be ripped apart, limb from limb.

Nonetheless, even if he were to truthfully say "I spent the whole of my summer holidays hanging out with Suizenji, head of the school's Journalism Club, in the mountains at the back of the Sonohara Air Base looking for UFOs", he didn't think his fate will be any different.

That truth was hidden alongside Asaba, in the incinerator's shadow. In just under thirteen hours, that will come to pass and become mere historical fact.

Asaba Naoyuki's summer vacation in his second year of middle school had all but disappeared, swallowed up by the mountains behind the Sonohara Air Base.

Just thirteen more hours to go.

Prisoners on the death row still get to smoke one last cigarette.

That was why it was okay for him to just sneak into the school's pool in the middle of the night for a swim.

Of course he should.

Somewhere right next to him, out of focus and in the dark, a cicada warbled, just once. For the last time, Asada checked that there was no one in his vicinity. Only the wooden, three-storied school building with all its windows wide open as if to say, "I see right through you and everything naughty you did" stood tall, glaring at Asaba.

Asaba knew that there was a staff room on the left side of that school building, and a narrow, *tatami*-matted room called the 'nap room' next to that,

whose purpose was unclear. If there was a teacher on the night shift, that was where he would be. However, there was no light emanating from any of the windows. Moreover, Asaba wasn't even sure whether the school had a teacher on night shift duty in the first place.

His destination, the pool, was in the same row as the gymnasium and about thirty meters from where the incinerator was, behind which Asaba was hiding. Surrounding the pool was not a fence but a tall wall made from a series of conjoined plastic panels.

That very wall was the infamous Berlin Wall, an unshakeable and impregnable barrier despite the chorus of resentful voices from male students complaining "We can't see the girls at their swimming lessons". However, right now, the wall was Asaba's ally. Thanks to that wall, no one would be able to look in and see him swimming in the pool at night. He had already mapped out his route of invasion. Asaba knew full well that the door at the entrance of the changing rooms was in such a bad shape that even if it were to be locked, the lock would give if he just put in a little strength while turning the doorknob.

Now all he needed was some pluck.

No way would anyone be here. He would never be caught.

However—

There was a certain uneasiness he couldn't quite shake off. In the unlikely event that he was found, he would be properly chewed out.

He ran.

The duffel bag bounced against his back as he sprinted the last thirty meters without anywhere to hide. He threw himself into a roll, heading into the shadow of the L-shaped brick wall that blocked the changing room door from view. He tried to steady his breathing as he looked around once again, and finally relaxed a little. Putting both hands on the doorknob of the door to the changing room, he turned it with all the strength he could muster. Asaba could almost feel metal grating against metal in his hands as the well-worn metal lock helplessly popped open.

Just then, he heard the siren of a patrol car.

He knew that it had nothing to do with him, but his body stiffened instinctively as he held his breath.

Oh, it must be that car again, he thought. He had heard it while hiding in the incinerator's shadow.

The siren faded away into the distance before abruptly ceasing to wail.

Asaba thought the patrol cars were frightfully busy tonight. Perhaps there was an incident somewhere. Come to think of it, there was a notice that said "Please be careful of spies from the north that may be hiding in your neighborhood" circulating around households just before summer vacation. Spies probably didn't have summer vacation.

He took a deep breath.

Quietly, he opened the door to the changing room before peeking inside.

It was pitch black, far too dark to change in. No matter the case, it wouldn't be a good idea to switch the lights on either. Thus, Asaba decided to change out of his clothes where he was right now, in the shadow of the brick wall. He didn't think anyone would come by.

He dropped the bag from his shoulders, opened its zipper, and realized his grave mistake.

He was on his way home from deep within the mountains.

In other words, his bag was crammed full of stuff he needed when he was in the mountains, like a toothbrush, a towel, a change of clothes, insect repellent spray, a camera, and a small radio transceiver. No matter how you look at it, there was no need for swim trunks.

That means he did not have swim trunks with him.

He was crestfallen.

Asaba crouched down and placed his forehead on his knees. Once, he had set off for a video store that was absurdly far away, hell bent on renting an adult video. "This is it!" he thought as he placed his hands on the packaging, before suddenly realizing that he had forgotten to bring his wallet with him. He felt as despondent as he did back then.

A sudden thought crossed his mind.

Since he was already here, couldn't he just swim stark naked?

Should he attempt that sort of foolhardiness?

Asaba briefly thought about how awesome it might feel to swim in the school's pool in the middle of the night with absolutely nothing on, then became uneasy wondering if he might have exhibitionist tendencies. Being naked wouldn't be too good, after all. Perhaps he could find something that he could wear in place of swim trunks, he thought, as he rummaged blindly through his bag.

His search yielded a pair of shorts, crumpled up into a ball.

It was a pair of school-issued exercise shorts that he had worn when sleeping in his sleeping bag.

After once again confirming that there was no one around him, Asaba hastily took off his pants and briefs before putting on the pair of shorts, and taking off his T-shirt. He looked down at himself. The pair of shorts he had on, unlike swim trunks, had pockets and no inner lining, and it felt awfully... breezy.

But he thought it didn't look too strange.

He had come all the way here, after all.

Steeling his resolve and kicking the clothes he had taken off into his bag, Asaba entered the changing rooms. He could barely make out the outline of the lockers as he felt his way through the dark. The changing room was damp and smelled of chlorine.

He walked past the showers and the disinfection tank, watching his step and taking care not to slip on the wet, slippery floor. Last summer, Miyake slipped and fell just about here and got himself covered in blood. He could still remember as vividly as if it were yesterday Miyake's voice as he cried "*Sensei*, will I die, will I die?" and Asaba inwardly muttered a word of apology. I'm sorry, Miyake, but you were extremely funny back then.

Pushing aside the swinging door, Asaba came out to the poolside.

It was then his enjoyable recollection of past events came to an abrupt end.



He briefly neglected to watch his step and stepped on a hose that was snaking around, and very nearly fell over.

Someone was already there at the poolside, before him.

It was a girl.

First of all, there the pool was, a standard-sized pool twenty-five meters long and fifteen meters wide. The surface of the water was so calm that it looked almost ethereal. However, what first caught his eye was the starlight reflected in the depths of the pool, several light years deep. It was as if a pool-shaped cut-out of the night sky was just lying there.

To Asaba, who had just emerged from the darkness of the changing rooms, the scene before his eyes was strangely vivid. In the midst of all that, the girl was crouching at the right corner of the pool with her back to Asaba, a hand gripping the handrail firmly. She was wearing a school-issued swimsuit and a swim cap and gazing intently at the inky, metallic surface of the water.

Asaba didn't even stop to wonder who she was.

He was so taken aback by the surprising turn of events that he couldn't even think.

All he could do was to stand there, rooted to the ground like a post.

Although he had taken great pains to not be seen, he also didn't expect to see anyone around. He did force his way past that door, after all, and it was not as if he had tried to cover up the sound of his footsteps as he walked here. If that girl had been here from the beginning, there was no way she did not hear anything.

However, as far as Asaba could see, the girl seemed completely oblivious to his presence. With her back still facing Asaba, she continued to stare fixedly at the surface of water without moving a hair. Emanating from her back was a sort of somberness that could not be put into words. Tension hung thick in the air, as if she was about to jump to her own death.

The girl moved.

While her right hand still held the handrail firmly, she reached out her left hand and touched the water surface.

Gingerly, as if she was doing some sort of experiment, she swirled the water lightly with her fingers.

Not one object disrupted the tranquility of the water surface, not even a single leaf. On it, ripples formed, spreading across the pool like radar waves, bouncing back when they reached the edges. The girl stared at the ripples as they came and went.

He finally got down to wondering who she was.

Was she a student from his school? Her swimsuit looked like the school's standard issue but it didn't have a name tag on it. She looked about his age, but he couldn't be too sure since he could only see her back. Diagonally behind her was a large bag that looked like it had been tossed down carelessly. Around it were clothes, strewn all over the place. That was probably her bag, and those were probably her clothes.

Then, in other words, this girl changed into her swimsuit by the poolside?

Asaba thought really, really hard, about why he was born a human being. He wanted to point with all his might and shout, why a human and not this wriggly hose over here, nor that deck brush leaning on the wall over there. As the girl, illuminated by the starlight, in school, at night, with no one in it, at a pool at night with no one around, slowly peels off her clothes one layer by one l—

By sheer force of will, Asaba twisted and broke off that chain of thought.

The vibes she was emitting were so serious that Asaba felt uncomfortable all of a sudden. He also felt ashamed for harboring that meaningless fantasy just a moment ago. He didn't know why this girl was here, nor what she was doing.

However, he thought that it was terribly unfair for her not to notice him standing there. Even if he didn't have any ill intent, what he was doing now was akin to peeping.

He decided to speak to her.

To tell her that he was here.

But what should he say? Without even deciding how he should string some words together to form a sentence, he took a deep breath.

The timing was bad.

Perhaps due to her squatting for too long, at the very instant she stood and took a tottering step, Asaba sucked in a breath of air and breathed out the words “Excuse me...”

She jumped in surprise at his words, attempting to turn back to look at him. Her balance, already precarious, was completely lost.

Just for a split second, their eyes met.

With the whites of her eyes, rounded in surprise, still suspended in mid-air, she fell bottom first into the pool.

With a loud splash, large droplets of water rained down on the poolside tiles.

Asaba became flustered, seized with fear as the situation developed rapidly. He thought about running away. Dazed, he scanned his surroundings, and realized, a little too late, that the pool was surrounded by a tall, flimsy wall.

The wall was not a magic mirror, so no one outside could peek in, nor could anyone inside look out. He had a feeling that the teacher on night duty or someone else may come storming in at any moment.

He should run away.

That was what Asaba decided to do, after a long indecisive bout. He ran towards the changing rooms and was about to make a right, but his feet stopped.

The splashing sounds behind him had yet to cease.

The girl was struggling in the water. Occasionally, an arm or a leg would stick out at an unexpected angle, breaking the water surface, before slapping against it as she sunk back down.

He thought she was just fooling around.

Even when the thought of her really drowning crossed his mind, his cold feet didn't allow his body to move immediately. When it did, he ran helter-skelter to the pool and leaped into it. As he had jumped in feet first, air was trapped in his shorts, causing them to puff out underwater like a pumpkin. He pushed against the water with both arms as he walked, closing an eye due to the water the girl

splashed his way with her arms and legs as he reached a hand out and said:

“Look, grab onto this, at least from this distance,”

“—maybe your legs could reach me?” was what he was about to say when the girl flung herself onto him. His feet slid on the bottom of the pool and his head was pulled underwater before he could even make a sound of surprise.

It was pitch dark underwater and he could not see a thing.

Since the girl was clinging onto him, he was unable to move freely, and of course, he could not breathe either.

He immediately fell into a panic.

He was unable to make sense of his current situation. He should have been able to touch the edge of the pool if he just reached out his hand, but he had no idea which way the edge of the pool was, nor where the surface or the bottom of the pool was, nor whether his body was facing upwards or downwards. He could very well be right in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He tried once to shake free of the girl’s grasp, but the more he tried to wriggle free the more desperate her death grip became. She had a strength that was almost unbelievable.

Asaba really thought that he might drown, right there and then. He tried very hard to convince himself that he could touch the bottom of the pool with his feet, that he was right next to the side of the pool as he fervently searched the water with both legs and an arm.

The tip of his fingers brushed past the edge of the pool.

The tip of his toes grazed the bottom of the pool.

He somehow managed to regain his footing, and finally, both their heads broke the surface of the water. *We’re saved*, was the thought that flooded through his body as he coughed up the water that had gotten into his windpipe.

With his feet firmly on the bottom of the pool, what felt like a bottomless mire just a few moments ago was a pool that only came up as high as his chest.

“Haha,” he laughed softly.

He lifted his head. To say their eyes met would have been an understatement.

It was the first time in his life that there was a girl's face at point-blank range, barely a cigarette-length away.

Their breathing was ragged, and they were still holding on to each other. Their bodies swayed, ever so slightly, with the movement of the water that they had roiled up.

She was a little shorter than Asaba. Water dripped from the tips of her hair peeking out from the bottom of her swim cap. Her expression seemed to say "I have never met another human being before," as she stared straight at him. In school, at night, with no one in it, at a pool, at night, with no one around, a girl he didn't know, illuminated by starlight...

He couldn't believe this situation was real.

Tilting her head slightly, the girl tried to say something, in a voice that sounded like a child who didn't know very many words trying to ask a question. It also sounded like she was going to exclaim in a foreign language.

"..."

The girl who was sticking closely to Asaba suddenly came to life. She took half a step away, turned her face away and covered her nose and mouth with both hands.

Her movement snapped Asaba, who had been staring at her face in fascination, back into reality. He was dismayed that he might have smelt strange, and exhaled into the palm of his hand in a furtive attempt to check whether his breath smelled bad.

The girl choked on something.

What followed was so astonishing that Asaba thought the girl might die. She was coughing up blood. Blood dripped from between the fingers that were covering her mouth.

"!! Ah, wah, uwa! Excuse me..."

With upturned eyes, the girl watched Asaba fret as he kicked up an unseemly fuss over the blood, before finally muttering in a voice that could be understood:

“Nosebleed.”

As she said that, she scooped up some water with one hand and washed away the blood that was dripping from her nose to her mouth. Asaba had assumed, incorrectly, that she had been coughing up blood, and when he took a closer look she was, indeed, simply having a nosebleed.

However, to Asaba, they were both the same.

In any case, he should do something.

With the vigor of a rocket, Asaba got up from the pool and ran towards the girl’s bag, located at the side of the pool. He tried very hard not to look at her clothes scattered all around, placing his hands on the massive zipper on the bag, which was at least a thumb-width wide.

The part of his brain that was panicking thought that ‘there should be a towel in it, at least’, and the part of his brain that was still calm told him that ‘this doesn’t look like a very girly bag’. It was dark green, made from a hard, tough material and had many large pockets, like the ones the soldiers from the Sonohara Air Base carried around. He opened the zipper without hesitation and pulled out the bath towel that was right on top, and what he saw right underneath it made him catch his breath.

Three plastic bottles, as large as juice cans, stuffed full of pills.

He saw something that he shouldn’t have seen, he thought.

He hastily zipped up the bag. He was in a hurry anyway, and the bottles of pills had such a large impact on him that his eyes couldn’t quite take a good look at anything else. That was why he inadvertently failed to spot the nine-millimeter caliber ‘something that *really* shouldn’t be seen’ with a sixteen-bullet magazine, even though its grip was sticking out.

Bath towel in hand, he darted back to the pool while putting on the most nonchalant expression he could muster.

The girl was finally in the midst of getting up from the pool, climbing out as if there were metal rods attached to her legs. She looked completely defenseless. Since Asaba had wholeheartedly decided to not stare at her, he awkwardly turned away as he went, “Here,” holding out the bath towel.

After a short while, he returned his gaze to her, which clashed with the girl's upturned one. She was sitting on the edge of the pool with her feet in the water, pressing onto her nose with both ends of the bath towel that was draped around her shoulders. Her nosebleed seems to have subsided, but the red splotches in her towel still made Asada's heart skip a beat.

What should he do?

He still felt as if he had taken a step out of reality, not to mention a little weirded out. Honestly, a large part of him wanted to say "Well then, I'll be heading back," and leave this place.

However—

The girl was still staring intently at him. He turned his face away once again.

He had a feeling that the girl would never get up from the side of the pool if he continued standing there.

"Did you see it?"

The girl asked, out of the blue.

Her words caught him off guard. Though you could say that he had hurried due to the sight of blood, he thought it unwise to open her bag without permission. Furthermore, to continue feigning ignorance when asked such a direct question would be kind of dishonest, and maybe even unmanly.

Like the girl, Asaba sat at the edge of the pool at a distance not too near yet not too far away.

"—are you ill?"

For a split second, the girl looked a little puzzled, but immediately shook her head. Asaba expected an explanation to follow, but the girl remained quiet. Unable to bear the silence, he strove to fill it.

"What's your name?"

"Iriya," the girl answered.

Every word she said sounded as if she was speaking in a foreign language, in an accent that was a little clumsy, a little odd.

“Is that your name? Or your surname?”

After taking in a breath, the girl answered, “Iriya, Kana.”

He thought that her name was written the same way as Iriya, the name of a place in Sonohara Town.

The girl waited patiently for Asaba to speak, compelling him to find something to say.

“Don’t you know how to swim?”

Just as the words left his mouth, he cursed himself for not asking something worth asking. Of course she couldn’t swim. Didn’t he just save her from drowning a while ago?

Asaba, who was careful not to meet her eyes, saw her nod at the edge of his field of vision.

He once again searched for something to say.

Perhaps due to the influence of the girl who could only speak in fragments, Asada was unable to turn the whirling doubts in his head into proper, coherent ‘questions’. If he were to verbalize his doubts as they were, raw and unprocessed, it would have been a simple question: “Who are you?”

He didn’t think she would be able to give a clear answer to that.

The silence persisted, which only heightened his nervousness. However, the more impatient he got trying to think of something to say, the more difficult it was for him to think of anything other than “Well then, I’ll be heading back.”

“You can swim?”

The girl asked, again out of the blue.

She was asking him if he knew how to swim. It took a while for him to fully comprehend what she was saying. At those words of hers, Asaba finally saw the light.

“—erm, if it’s okay with you...”

This girl couldn’t swim. Although it wasn’t really one of his strong points, he could, at the very least, swim.



In that respect, he could show off to her, even if it was just a little.

“...I could teach you, how to swim.”

Even though Asaba was the one who suggested it in the first place, he felt uncertain. The girl had just suffered a nosebleed a few moments ago. There were heaps of suspicious-looking medicine in her bag. He knew not how she felt about all those, but wondered if it was even possible for her to swim in the pool in the first place.

Despite all that, the girl nodded, and her expression brightened up, just a fraction.

Merely looking at that face of hers gave Asaba new resolve.

“Wait here for a while.”

He thought of bringing over a kickboard and jogged over to the where the equipment was kept. Sensing someone’s presence behind him, he turned back to look and found that, despite him asking her to wait, she had followed him like a puppy.

Even as he flipped over the mountain of kickboards, trying his best to look for ones that were clean and not slimy, he could feel her gaze tickling his back.

Rather than not being able to swim, this girl hasn’t swum a stroke before in her life. She must have wanted swim so much that she made this huge decision to come by the pool.

That must be it, Asaba decided, without any basis whatsoever.

He did ask her if she was sick, and she had shaken her head. However, even if she was ‘not sick’, it wasn’t normal to be carrying so much medicine around.

Maybe she was weak since birth.

Or maybe she was a long time sufferer of a disease that had only just recently been cured.

That must be it.

This must be a girl who spent her most of her life going in and out of the hospital, someone who was often absent from school and could only observe

from the sidelines during physical education classes. She watched her classmates swim in the pool and admired them, and recently, when her condition finally improved, she asked her mother, “Could I visit the pool?”, but her mother’s reply was something like, “What is this silly girl saying now of course you cannot go oh dear it’s almost time now have you taken your medicine?”. But, despite that, she didn’t give up and clandestinely slipped out of the house at night to come to this pool. That must be how it was.

If that was the case, it would explain everything: why she seemed so fragile, why she seemed to be brooding over something when looking out over the pool, why she put on a swim cap in dead earnest just to swim, not to mention the sudden nosebleed and the large amount of medicine.

He returned to the pool with two kickboards in his arms, jumping into the pool feet first with a splash. The girl hesitated briefly at the edge of the pool before also jumping in feet first. It looked like she was copying exactly what he did.

He handed the girl a kickboard.

“You won’t drown if you hold on to this.”

Then, something suddenly nagged at him.

“—erm, can you put your head underwater?”

The girl shook her head fearfully.

That meant that they would have to start from there, then.

That was the most time-consuming part. No matter how much he encouraged and pacified her, it was very difficult for her to put her face into the water. When she finally managed to submerge her entire head, things progressed much faster. They practiced stretching out their bodies while holding on to the edge of the pool, flutter kicks, breathing, and finally moved on to exercises on the kickboard.

It was now about 9:10 PM on the last day of summer holidays in his second year of middle school.

By then, the girl could swim about fifteen meters while holding on to the

kickboard, despite making flutter kicks with her knees bent and moving rather slowly for all the water that was splashing wildly about in the pool. Furthermore, if he left her like this, she would start veering towards the right. That being said, those were long strides of improvement for a complete beginner. She might even have been athletic to begin with.

Asaba, on the other hand, was nervous and cautious at first, and considered immediately stopping if her nose started bleeding again, but he became a little greedy after looking at how quick she was progressing.

The girl remained as taciturn as ever and only nodded or shook her head at what Asaba said, but, bit by bit, her expression became more cheerful every time she was able to do something new.

“That was awesome. If you keep this up, you’ll be the swimming club’s ace by next week.”

The girl seemed somewhat delighted to hear that. In the past hour or so, Asaba had somehow become able to read the small changes in her expression. The expression she was wearing now was the happiest one thus far.

“Well then, shall we graduate from using the kickboard?”

At that very moment, the girl’s expression froze.

“It’ll be fine, really. You can already swim on your own. It’ll be the same with or without the kickboard.”

The girl nodded. But, that didn’t mean she agreed with him. Her nod seemed to be simply out of a desire to not disappoint Asaba.

“E-Erm.”

Asaba caved, just like that.

“Then, why don’t you try just holding on to my hands?” Asaba asked, holding out both his hands.

This time, the girl nodded with an expression that looked a little relieved. She reached out to grab both Asaba’s wrists while Asaba in turn, held on to her wrists as well.

It was then Asaba finally noticed *those*.

With a start, she also realized that Asaba had noticed them, and stiffened. The girl may have also forgotten that she had *those* things on her wrists.

Asaba, with his fingers, felt her wrists.

There was something round and hard on them.

Slowly, he turned her wrists over.

They were silver metal spheres, as large as egg yolks, buried in the girl's wrists.

The girl stared intently at him, as their bodies swayed with the movement of the water.

Reality, swayed by the water, once again receded into the distance.

"It doesn't hurt."

So she said, drawing nearer to him and offering up her wrists so that Asaba may have a better look.

That burning question. The question he should have asked, before anything else.

Who, are you?

"It's nothing, really."

They seemed to have switched positions; she seemed to be holding the upper hand now. Now, she was the one telling him not to be afraid. Held spellbound by that earnest gaze and that foreign accent in her tone, Asaba tried to shrink away but was unable to take the first step backward.

"Want to try licking them?"

The girl was already right in front of him, almost in his face. All he could see between the girl and his face were her wrists with those silver spheres buried in them.

"They taste like electricity, you know."

Everything didn't seem real: the school at night that shouldn't have anyone in it, a pool at night that shouldn't have anyone in it, the starlight, and the girl he didn't know.

Suddenly, the siren of a patrol car wailed.

In his shock, Asaba let spill a pathetic-sounding cry as the siren seemed to come from right beside them. It really sounded as if the patrol car was either inside of the school, or even if it were outside, it was possible that it could be circling the school grounds. He could see the flashing lights from the rotating beacons on those patrol cars reflected in the windows of the gymnasium. It wasn't just one, or two cars.

The girl remained silent.

You could say that her expression shifted, but the fact that she didn't look like she felt even a tenth of the surprise Asaba felt further filled him with panic. In any case, he thought he should do something. Without understanding what was going on, he grabbed that girl's hand and pulled her along as he blindly tried to get out of the pool.

But, before Asaba could reach the edge of the pool, that man appeared.

From the swinging door of the changing rooms, he walked placidly towards them.

He was tall, and Asaba couldn't tell how old he was.

He had his suit thrown over his shoulder, and already had a bath towel in one hand. He wasn't wearing a tie. His facial features made him look young, with droopy eyes, and he seemed to be the sort who would crack ribald jokes and then laugh uproariously at them himself. However, he also gave off the impression that he was awfully fatigued, or perhaps worn out by something.

"It's time to go back," the man said, as he stopped in his tracks and looked the girl straight in the eye from the poolside.

Reality seemed to have been washed away, disappearing into the drainage of the pool, not unlike the girl's blood a few moments ago.

He didn't know what was going on, and was horribly confused, so to say he wasn't scared would have been a terrible lie. Yet, in a show of courage, he took a step forward to stand in front of the girl, taking on a stance to protect her.

The man looked at him with an expression that said "Oh...!" He was seemingly

impressed by this unexpected turn of events.

“It’s okay, I know him.”

The girl whispered from behind his back.

“Who’s that?” Asaba asked over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the man.

“—about that. Well, I’m sort of like her elder brother. What about you?” the man answered.

Asaba swallowed, and in a deliberately surly tone, said, “I’m a student from this school” and fought the urge to add the polite copula *desu* at the end, which he very nearly did. The man scanned his surroundings, and went, “Why then, are you here at a time like this?”

“I wanted to swim.”

A smile broke out across the man’s face upon hearing Asaba’s terse reply.

“...That so, is that so. I see. Summer holidays end today, after all.”

The man squatted at the edge of the pool. Looking at Asaba with a broad grin, he said:

“I used to do that a lot back then, too. The school I went to had a live-in janitor and he was this incredibly querulous old man, yes? Rather than just going to swim, it was more like a battle of pluck amongst my friends.”

“We would make a huge racket while swimming, and once or twice that old man came rushing over with a broom, but we knew that he would do so from the start, so it wasn’t that easy to catch us. Then, after succeeding in getting away, we would prank-call the old man and go, ‘Ah, Nagasawa-kun.’ This was us mimicking our headmaster, yes? And Nagasawa was this old man’s name, yes? In old man speak we would go, ‘Ah Nagasawa-*kun*, about that, the fact that you cannot even catch students who sneak into the pool? Since that’s how it is, it’ll be the sack for you.’ That old man was hopping mad, you know. It was so funny.”

There were signs of several people and cars outside the pool; the quiet sounds of a car engine, the sound of tires crunching on gravel, the sound of a door closing, as if someone was rapping on it.

They were surrounded.

Despite that, no one except this man entered the pool area.

This man was extremely suspicious. He sounded reasonable, seemed to be playing the role of her brother, and it didn't look like the role was something he created just for appearance's sake. But, that very fact was rather unsettling.

"Excuse me..."

Once again, that burning question crossed his mind.

What are you guys?

Much like that girl, he didn't think that the man would give a clear answer to his question. His words abruptly lost its momentum from the beginning of his sentence, and the man went ahead and continued speaking.

"Even now, I am grateful to him. He went along with all the games that we kids played, after all."

"It was well known that we were the ones playing tricks, so even if he didn't catch us he could have at least identified us by our names. However, not once did he tattle on us to our teacher... That's why, well, even now, I'm quite lenient towards mischievous lads like you," said the man, as he stared right at Asaba.

"I shall not breathe a word of you being here, but, in return, don't ask any questions."

That was what he said.

Asaba understood.

Under his watchful stare, Asaba gave a small nod.

After seeing his nod, the man flashed a broad grin. He fished something that looked like a transceiver out from his coat pocket and briskly said:

"We're done here. C1, we'll proceed to leave now."

While stretching his back, he stood up.

"Well then, come up now. Put away the kickboards and wash your eyes after that, too. By the way..."

He turned to the girl.

“Isn’t today your first time swimming?”

With Asaba helping her up as she got out of the pool, the girl said, simply.

“He taught me how.”

The man had an expression on his face that said: “Oh, is that so?” He threw the towel over the girl’s head as he said, “I guess he did you a favor, then. You thank him, too,” as he unceremoniously pushed her head downwards with his hands still on the towel, forcing her into a bow.

“Do go out before us. Those people outside won’t harm you.”

Asaba thoughts were jumbled up inside his head.

He had so many things he wanted to say, so many things he wanted to ask.

As he walked by the side of the pool on unsteady feet and pushed open the swinging door of the changing room, he glanced back. The man gave him a small wave, and the girl stood motionless beside him, like a doll with poor balance, watching him intently from under the shadow of the towel draped over her head.

Everything didn’t seem real.

He had forgotten to put away the kickboards and wash his eyes, but the man didn’t say anything.



Asaba Naoyuki’s UFO summer began two months ago, after school on the twenty-fourth of June.

There was this truly ‘high-spec’ guy called Suizenji Kunihiro, from Class 3-2 in Sonohara Middle School.

His student number was 12, and he was 175 centimeters tall despite being only 15 years of age. His standard score for the national trial examinations was 81, and he ran the 100-meter in 11 seconds without any exertion showing on his face.

But.



This guy was, by nature, someone who used his energy on all the wrong things, Asaba thought.

After all, he was a guy who in all earnestness wrote 'CIA' as his very first choice on his career questionnaire.

On top of being number 12 in Class 3-2 and 175 centimeters and 81 and 11 seconds, he was also the self-proclaimed head of the school's Journalism Club. As to why it was 'self-proclaimed', it was because this Journalism Club was not recognized as a formal club by school regulations. The members of this club have always been just third-year student Suizenji and second-year student Asaba. However, in spring in the same year, Sudou Akiho, who was now in the same class as Asaba, barged into the club with an "I guess I will join, too." Asaba had no idea what she was thinking.

With her, they now had three members.

According to the school's regulations, they were now able to submit a petition for a club. If they became a lawful, formal club, they would be able to use a club room and receive a club budget, which was why Akiho was always pestering them with "Go apply, go apply." However, the most crucial person here, Suizenji, was completely uninterested in doing so. His reason for this was, again, something rather out of the world.

"In order to protect our autonomy and independence as journalists, we should maintain a careful distance from organizations."

Spoken like a true idiot, Akiho had said.

Despite saying all these, Asaba thought that even if Suizenji were to submit a petition, the school probably wouldn't have recognized his club anyway.

That was because what's written in the newspaper is, well, what it is.

In Sonohara Middle School, even if there were some who didn't know that Suizenji Kunihiro could run the 100-meter in 11 seconds, there was not a single person who did not know that Suizenji Kunihiro was a maniac, obsessed with the paranormal.

To add on to that, even the world-famous CIA was nothing more than one of the means to uncover the truth behind certain supernatural phenomena to

Suizenji. When asked why he wanted to join the CIA, Suizenji himself said: “If I could get into CIA and become a covert operative, I could do stuff like participate in secret missions or read classified documents, and perhaps I would get to know all the things I wish to know.”

Then again, what exactly ‘he wished to know’ generally changed with the seasons.

For example, the Suizenji topic for last winter was, ‘Does extra-sensory perception really exist?’ At that time, Suizenji (and Asaba) were found guilty of taking over the broadcasting room and doing a telepathic experiment using all the students in the school as subjects.

They received a huge earful from their teacher.

The coming spring, the Suizenji topic changed to “Do ghosts really exist?” At that time, Suizenji (and Asaba) had, in the middle of the night, infiltrated the female toilet at Ichikawa Daimon Station on the Teito Line which was rumored to be haunted by ghosts, to collect data. Someone called the police on them.

They received a huge earful from their teacher.

This was the kind of person that editor-in-chief was. In other words, that was the kind of newspaper it was.

Even the name of the newspaper was, up until recently, ‘Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper’.

However, circumstances changed slightly when Akiho entered the club. Even till now, Suizenji had managed to keep articles relating to the Suizenji topic at close to seventy percent of the paper. However, Akiho’s ‘serious’ articles have been stealthily encroaching on his territory. At a recent editor’s meet, Akiho had spoken frankly, insisting that ‘the paper’s name should be changed’. After a five-hour long war of words, Asaba’s mediation efforts finally bore fruit; both sides just barely found middle ground at ‘Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper’ and the discussion, for now, seemed to have been wrapped up.

When Asaba asked Nishikubo, who sat next to him, what he thought of the newspaper’s new name, he said:

“When it had ‘Solar System’ in it, we could laugh at your paper since it

sounded far too grandiose. But now, you get the feeling that just the ‘Sonohara’ part has become much closer to the ‘Radio Wave’ part. It sounds awesome, really.”

That was how things were, so, even today, Suizenji Kunihiro continued to run riot with an empty clubroom as his stronghold, and the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper continued to be a cheap looking, flash placard newspaper containing profoundly deep content which was put up on the various bulletin boards around the school once a month.

Two months ago, after school on the twenty-fourth of June.

Suizenji’s interest in “spiritual phenomena”, the topic he had picked since spring, showed no signs of waning and Asaba was hard at work doing physical labor. Staggering under the weight of the package he was carrying in both his arms, he thought, “Finally!” when he reached the row of club rooms. Finding it too troublesome to place the package on the floor once, he called, “Akiho—If you’re in please open the door,” thinking that Akiho may have already reached.

She had.

The door to the club room which they unlawfully occupied opened, and Sudou Akiho peeked her head out. Her eyes widened when she saw the large package Asaba was carrying.

“What’s that?”

Asaba entered the room and plopped the package down on the table. He sank into a folding chair next to that table and sighed.

“*Uwa*, that was heavy.”

It was a large pile of graduation albums, borrowed from the library. The twenty-one books, when stacked, was about 50 centimeters high, and it was made from good quality paper which made them awfully heavy.

“This isn’t all of it. There are two piles just like this. Really, there’s nothing good about a school that’s old.”

“Right... So what are going to do with these?”

“Ah, you haven’t heard from chief?”

“What haven’t I heard?”

“The plan for the July edition. The one for ‘Hair raising! Ghost photos in graduation albums!’”

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**Translation Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> The Lucky No. 5 Incident: Wikipedia link [here](#)

## (Part 2)

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“Huh? Wasn’t the plan for the next edition something to do with Ouija boards or—”

Asaba took out a can of Oolong tea that had been rolling about in his back pocket for quite a while now and pulled off the tab.

“You mean, ‘Let’s ask the Ouija board! Experiments to predict exam questions!’? That was trashed.”

“Why?!”

Akiho instinctively raised her voice, which surprised Asaba slightly. If the three members of the Journalism Club were to split into factions, Suizenji would be the conservative and Akiho the reformist. Since Akiho strove for the newspaper to become a ‘serious’ newspaper, Asaba thought that she would be delighted to hear any one of Suizenji’s plans petering out. Holding a sip of Oolong tea in his mouth and looking up at Akiho, he waited to see if she would say anything else. Akiho looked away huffily and sat herself down roughly on the folding chair she was sitting on before Asaba came in. In front of her was a laptop computer, and somewhere in the middle of a half-written article titled ‘I’m Giving Away a Puppy’, a cursor blinked. Akiho placed her *hands* on the keyboard before continuing suddenly:

“But Asaba, weren’t you looking up various things and preparing for it? Doesn’t that mean that all your effort has gone to waste?”

“It can’t be helped. It’s not as if Chief trashed the idea without any reason. I mean, Chief and I sometimes sleep over in the club room, right? Seems like Kawaguchi caught wind of the plan to predict exam questions, and told him, ‘Surely you’re not saying that you guys have been sneaking into the staff room in the middle of the night, right?’”

On an unrelated note, Asaba and Akiho’s homeroom teacher, Kawaguchi Taizou ‘The Manservant of Science’, who was single and thirty-five years of age, was admittedly on extremely bad terms with Suizenji Kunihiro ‘The Pursuer of

the Truth', who was also number 12 in Class 3-2 and 175 centimeters and 81 and 11 seconds.

"Apparently Kawaguchi talked about it briefly during the staff morning assembly. I heard that Chief got called to the staffroom and even got a warning about it from his homeroom teacher. Somehow the topic seems to be troublesome, so he said that if predicting exam questions and the like wasn't going to work out then we might as well pick something else."

"Chief said that?"

"Yup."

Akiho knitted her eyebrows together in a little frown.

"—but, that's still pretty surprising. That Suizenji, of all people, would give up after a mere warning from a teacher."

Asaba laughed. "Well, you really can't know with him. He actually seemed quite unperturbed. Perhaps, to Chief, whether it was through an Ouija board or ghost photos the final destination remains the same. Therefore if he were to run out of luck and meet an obstacle while walking down one path, he probably thinks that he should just walk around it."

Perhaps, the person who was truly vexed was himself, Asaba thought.

He drained the remaining Oolong tea in one gulp and proclaimed with renewed vigor, "Well then," as he stood up. Picking up several books from the large pile of graduation albums in his hands, Asaba then dropped them onto the table with a loud thud.

"But I think this plan is pretty good too. Look, these photos are so old that they look creepy anyway, so we probably could find at least one convincing photograph that shows someone being surrounded by a ghostly-ish aura. Whether or not it's really a ghost being caught on camera is beside the point, though."

"Say it however you want," said Akiho as she returned to her article titled 'I'm Giving Away a Puppy'. Asaba could not really catch what she said.

"What was that about?"

*I will only give the puppy to someone who would cherish it,* she typed in *romaji* before lifting her head from the screen to glower at Asaba with slightly moist eyes.

“What’s with the ‘Whether or not it’s real is beside the point’? I already know anyway. It’s quite plain to see that although you always have this look on your face that goes ‘Oh, I have no choice but to accompany Chief,’ you don’t actually dislike stuff like that, right? Telekinesis and ghosts and such.”

*To someone who would care responsibly for this two-month-old male mixed-breed...*

“I won’t be helping out with that plan. Hmph, I couldn’t care less. You borrowed so many albums and brought them here, too. By the time we look through all of them, I bet it’ll be the next decade already. If you showed them to Chief, he would definitely yell ‘Whose arm is this?!’ every two pages or so. Ah, and here I thought Asaba was in the neutral party. I guess I’m my only ally here in this club. Sigh. The road to reform sure is steep.”

At that very moment...

“This is absurd!”

He was probably eavesdropping on them from behind the door.

“What sort of tone are you using when talking about reform?! Is your ‘reform’ about the joys and sorrows surrounding our sports clubs’ alternating victories and defeats!! Or does your ‘reform’ refer to the search for a new owner for cats and dogs!! Answer me, Special Correspondent Sudou!!”

Suizenji entered the room, practically kicking the door down while holding melon bread in his right hand and a packet of milk in his left. There was a glint in the silver rim of his glasses, which he wore only for show and at a whim.

Asaba was rather taken aback by Suizenji’s effervescence. “—d-did something good happen?” he asked.

Akiho offered Suizenji only an icy glance before saying, “You look like an idiot.”

Suizenji snickered. “You still seem to bear a grudge against me for not erasing

the phrase ‘Radio Wave’ from the name of our newspaper, Special Correspondent Sudou. Certainly, a name change to ‘Sonohara Middle School Newspaper’ might be a fitting climax to crown your narrow-minded view of reform. However! ‘Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper’, which has since become the old name of our newspaper, referred to expertise in a genre as expansive as the solar system and reporting as speedy as radio waves...”

At that, Akiho stood up, kicking away her chair.

“I want to *improve* this journalism club! I *don’t* want to surgically operate on common sense using radio waves, unlike someone here! Besides, what are we going to do if we lose readers simply because of the name of our newspaper?”

They began dragging out an argument that had already been previously dealt with. Asaba once again found himself caught in the middle of it. Despite that, he chuckled.

“Chief, you’re still hung up over ‘Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper’, aren’t you?”

“That is correct. I am still very much hung up on it. By the way, Special Correspondent Asaba.”

With the hand that was still holding on to the melon bread, Suizenji pointed at the pile of graduation albums stacked up like a mountain, as if he was going to shoot an arrow at it.

“What are those?”

Asaba was flabbergasted. After all, the person who had ordered him to borrow those graduation albums from the library was none other than Suizenji himself.

“—graduation albums. I borrowed them from the library.”

“Special Correspondent Asaba. What is something like that doing here?”

At this, Akiho, who stood next to him, knitted her eyebrows. Without knowing what was going on, Asaba replied, “Uh—weren’t we going look through them to see if we could find a photo we could use?”

“Special Correspondent Asaba. What on earth do you mean by ‘a photo we



could use’?”

Asaba turned instinctively to face Akiho and was met with a face that said *it’s no use even if you look at me*.

Both Asaba and Akiho began speaking simultaneously.

“That was Chief’s proposal, wasn’t it? ‘Ghost photos in graduation albums’, the new plan for the July issue?”

“I heard about it from Asaba. You discarded the earlier plan, right?”

Suizenji let out a lengthy sigh. The look he had in his eyes was of someone who had lifted his gaze to gaze at a sunset but had looked in the opposite direction. He whispered, “I did.”

Asaba heard him.

Akiho did not.

She asked once more, “Harh?”

“THAT PLAN HAS BEEN DISCARDEDDDD!!”

Without warning, Suizenji roared, Godzilla-like. He slapped a hand on his forehead and shook his head in a highly-strung manner as he walked determinedly across the room.

“Answer me, answer me, my two special correspondents!! Ah ah ah ah what a thing to happen, that you two were still caught up in something like ghosts!!”

Throwing open the window at the end of the room, Suizenji let forth a shriek, launching it into the azure sky on the twenty-fourth of June after school as if it were an anti-aircraft missile.

“Y’ALL TOO LATEEE———!!”

*Clatter.*

Closing the window silently with both hands, Suizenji turned his back on the light streaming in from the other side of the frosted glass.

In a quiet voice that was completely different from the one before, he said:

“Well then, special correspondents. Do you know what day today is, the

twenty-fourth of June?”

Both of them looked at each other once again. Akiho looked at Asaba with a look in her eyes that said *what was that, did he eat something strange*, but Asaba silently responded with *I have no idea* with a shake of his head.

Left without a choice, Akiho answered Suizenji without much confidence, “Thursday, right?” and Asaba ventured a “Toilet Paper Day.”

“No.”

Then, Suizenji gravely told them the correct answer:

“The twenty-fourth of June is International UFO Day.”

Ah—.

At long last, both of them understood.

The Suizenji topic changed with the season.

The winter of ESPs had passed, the ghosts of spring had passed, and the day for the Suizenji topic to receive a thorough update has come again, without any forewarning whatsoever.

Asaba slumped his shoulders, crestfallen. Akiho returned to ‘I’m Giving Away a Puppy’. A *three-month-old Shiba-ken*, she typed, pressing the space key repeatedly to enter the correct character for *-ken*, she said:

“I see it’s that time again.”

“Those were heavy, though,” was all Asaba could say.

“I’ll wear the summer uniform from tomorrow onwards then.”

“Those were heavy, though,” was all Asaba could manage.

“Look here, why are you two acting so calm? You should be deeply moved you know, deeply moved!”

Suizenji’s tone of voice had returned to an informal one.

*Like hell we would be*, thought the both of them at the same time. Above all, Asaba had suffered a great blow. He gave the large pile of graduation albums on the table a fleeting glance. Thinking about how he now needed to return all

those made him feel like sinking into the bottom of the earth.

“In other words, we’re not doing ghosts anymore and chasing down UFOs instead, right?”

“Yep.”

Suizenji nodded in assent, narrowed his eyes into slits, and smiled while making an extremely pleased face.

Year after year, a rather large number of fresh, new schoolgirls will get taken in by this smile of his and commit acts of sheer folly by converting valuable paper resources into love letters and sticking them into his shoe locker.

Perhaps Akiho thought to ask him, just in case.

“—erm, why is the twenty-fourth of June International UFO Day?”

“Special Correspondent Sudou!! Can you still call yourself a correspondent from the Sonohara Radio Wave! Are you able to hold your head up high and say that you are doing your best as a journalist, without even knowing something like that?”

“It’s normal to not know something like that!” she snapped.

“Then I shall give you a hint. The date was Tuesday, the twenty-fourth of June in 1947 AD, and the location was approximately 9500 feet up in the sky on Mount Rainier in Washington DC, North America.”

Asaba, who was slowly recovering bit by bit from the earlier blow, reacted to that hint.

He seemed to have heard that somewhere before—

Mount Rainier.

He remembered hearing that name before.

It must be a children’s book on UFOs that he read as a child or something like that—

“—the Kenneth Arnold Incident?”

That name fell from his lips just as they reached his mouth.

As if it was a nickname of a friend from long ago whose face he didn't even remember, that name evoked deep feelings of nostalgia. He was slightly impressed with the fact that the name had remained in some corner of his mind.

"As one would expect of Special Correspondent Asaba!"

Suizenji walked towards the cork bulletin board hanging on the wall and slapped on a red, round sticker on the 'Asaba' column on the 'Good Job!' Chart.

Wheeling around to face them again, he continued.

"Kenneth Arnold, who was flying in a light aircraft over Mount Rainier, witnessed 'nine saucer-looking unidentified flying objects being thrown across the water surface from the way they skipped as they flew'. This is the very first officially reported sighting of UFOs. Thereupon the twenty-fourth of June became International UFO day."

Suizenji concluded his explanation with satisfied nods.

However, Asaba still couldn't quite get over 'Ghost photos in graduation albums'.

"—then what about next issue's plan? Do you have anything in mind?"

"Needless to say, the collection of data for our next article would warrant a long and arduous journey in an extremely harsh environment. We would need to be careful and meticulous with our preparations."

"Huh?"

"Special Correspondent Sudou. We shall leave the pages for the July issue entirely in your hands. Write to your heart's content as many 'serious' articles as you like. The two of us will be busy with preparations for our top-secret data collection."

Akiho and Asaba both went "*Harh?*" which made the both of them sound like fools.

"I-It's not easy for me to come up with so many articles all of a sudden, you know!"

"E-Erm, 'the two of us' refers to you and me, right?"

“Since Special Correspondent Asaba is concerned about his physical stamina, if you must, use exercise equipment like the *Bull-worker* or drink herbal tonics like *Yomeishu*. In any case, do try to get into shape for this, starting from today.”

Asaba began to feel uneasy. The phrase ‘top-secret data collection’ had an ominous ring to it. He might be dragged off to some appalling place and be forced to do outrageous things.

“Where are we going to do this, err, top-secret data collection?”

“Oh, in the mountains just over there.”

Upon hearing that response, Asaba heaved a sigh of relief. That was because he did not yet know that this one moment of negligence would cause consume his entire summer vacation.

He asked again, “Why do we have to go to mountains again?”

Suizenji, flashing a bold grin, said, “Why, you ask? Only mountains have UFOs, right?” as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

Such were the happenings on the twenty-fourth of June after school, nearing summer.

Asaba Naoyuki’s winter of ESPs had passed, his spring of ghosts had passed, and his summer of UFOs had arrived.



“And?”

One must first inhale to let out a sigh. If he took in a breath now, the offensive smell of damp dust cloths and chalk-trampled-to-pieces will assault his nostrils. This was the smell of a classroom, the smell of the entire school, the smell that reminded him that his summer vacation was now a thing of the past, the smell of the first day of the second semester.

“Are you serious? You were at the mountains behind Sonohara Air Base for the entire summer vacation?”

Asaba slumped limply face-down on his desk next to the window, nodding wordlessly with his face rubbing against his folded arms.

Standing by the side of the desk and peering into Asaba's face was Nishikubo.

"Are you an idiot or what?"

He basically summed up Asaba's summer vacation in that one sentence.

The day unfolded just as he predicted; Kawaguchi gave him a severe telling off, the entire modern Japanese class during the first period went into his right ear and out the left, and he barely escaped with his life to reach the day's first recess.

"Is it really like, well, that? Did you pitch a tent in the mountains and boil rice in a mess-tin?"

"Did you really do something as dumb as that?" was what Nishikubo might as well have asked, with the tone he was using.

Absent-mindedly and wearily, Asaba said:

"—Chief drove out in a mini pickup, so we could make frequent trips to the convenience store. That's why we had boxed lunches from the convenience store, ready-made curry and the like."

In fact, he had gone through almost every single kind of boxed lunch from the convenience store and just looking at ready-made curry had put him off for a while now. Only now did he realize how grateful he was to Akiho for dropping off provisions every now and then.

"On top of that, it's not like I was in the mountains the whole time. Maybe once in about three or four days, I'd go home whenever I felt like eating normal food or having a bath. Chief was up there the whole time, though."

"So, your chief went without a shower the entire summer?"

"He couldn't have. A little way down those mountains towards Ootsukidai, there's, err, something like a baseball field."

Nishikubo racked his brains and continued:

"What was the place called again? It was some *nan-* or *kan-* Memorial Sports Park, right?"

"Yup, that one. He could have bathed out in the open with the running water

supply. We aren't the Special Forces, so we wouldn't have been able to hide away in the mountains for the entire summer without the running water and washroom there."

"But, bathing in the open, you said? Won't there be quite a few people around?"

"In the afternoon, yes. But only the occasional car with a couple in it will show up at night. Although Chief didn't really care even if it was in the afternoon."

"I would think so," said Nishikubo with a laugh. Asaba laughed as well.

"The point is, you guys were camping, right? Weren't you guys actually enjoying yourselves, then?"

"Something like that," Asaba answered.

Perhaps because it was already in the past, his unpleasant memories had started to fade.

He, however, thought that it probably wasn't just that.

If he were to carefully think back on his summer, he had a feeling that 'it wasn't the least bit interesting' would not be an accurate description.

He managed to feed a raccoon dog.

He also 'collected data' by using firecrackers on the cars in the sports park which were rocking back and forth.

Above everything else, if he had to confess, the plan to 'monitor the enemy' at a 'secret base' they had prepared 'in the mountains which no one could come to except their allies' sent a thrill up his spine. He did not expect to wind up building make-believe secret bases at his age, but Chief, despite *his* age, was a person who would, in heartfelt earnestness, do things like that. Although it was true that he was in part coerced into going along with the plan, there were definitely fun times after he dove into it all.

His summer vacation might not have been too bad after all.

However, at the very end of it, he had felt like doing something reckless, so he had sneaked into the pool, and then...

“Oi.”

Nishikubo prodded his shoulder, jolting Asaba back into reality.

“Earth to Asaba! Why are you spacing out like that?”

“Sorry. What?”

“—like I was saying, you guys hid away in the mountains behind the Sonohara Air Base looking for UFOs, right? Did you manage to take at least one photograph?”

“Of course not,” said Asaba with a laugh. “Bumping into some guy who was looking to bury a dead body would have been much more likely.”

“How disappointing,” Nishikubo grumbled and just as he was about to lose interest in the subject altogether...

“Oh, but I heard something like this before.”

Hanamura, whose seat was in front of Asaba’s, had adjusted his sitting position to face backward in order to weigh in on their conversation. He had probably been listening to their conversation with his back facing them the entire time.

“The rumor that the Sonohara Air Base is actually a UFO base has been going around for a long time, or so they say.”

Nishikubo, in an even more doubtful sounding tone, continued:

“Even I’ve heard of things like that before, but isn’t it like, you know, that? People mistaking stealth aircraft for UFOs? You hear about UFOs everywhere, not just in Sonohara. You’ll hear many first-hand accounts of UFOs in any town with a large airfield. That’s especially true for Sonohara Air Base, where the Air Self Defense Force and the US Air Force gather, so they’d probably be launching planes at some strange, unusual timings. They won’t make announcements like ‘That was actually our plane’ every time their planes were mistaken for UFOs even if it did cause an uproar, right?”

“This is just Chief’s opinion, but...”

Asaba interjected suddenly.



“The mysterious flying objects that were reportedly sighted near Sonohara Air Base are called ‘Area Sonohara’s Foo Fighters’, and are actually quite well-known in the UFO mania community. They’re often mentioned in magazines too. Those mysterious flying objects that Allied pilots saw during World War II were the first Foo Fighters. At first, they thought they were German or Japanese secret war weapons. But, after the war ended, apparently the German and Japanese pilots had seen similar things in the sky and thought that they were the Allied forces’ secret weapons. At the end of all that, people agreed that those sightings were either some sort of natural phenomenon or the result of a collective hallucination. Of course, to UFO maniacs, ‘Foo Fighters’ is just another name for UFOs.”

The look that Nishikubo and Hanamura wore while listening to Asaba’s story could only be described as half impressed and half scandalized.

Noticing both their expressions, Asaba continued:

“—that’s just Chief’s opinion, though.”

Nishikubo placed his hand on Asaba’s shoulder with a light pat.

“Stop deceiving yourself, Asaba.”

“W-What do you mean?”

“Okay, okay. And? What does your chief think about the true identity of Area Sonohara or whatever that is?”

“—I wonder. I really don’t know if Chief is someone who pays attention to details or someone who’s laid-back. Though I’ve never really asked him, I think he doesn’t really care what they really are, surprisingly.”

“Well, what do you think, then?”

Somehow feeling like he was being driven to a corner, Asaba continued.

“Among the UFO maniacs, the most prominent, or rather, most well-established theory is that the Sonohara Air Base is launching man-made UFOs. People in America are saying that too. Rumor has it that they recovered a UFO that fell from the sky and they made some aircraft with astounding capabilities from the technology. I think that’s probably the case.”

“And so, if we finally go to war, UFO fighter aircraft will be whizzing around in the sky?” said Hanamura, amused.

Nishikubo added with a look of exaggerated amazement, “You know, why can’t they just be ‘high capability aircraft’? Why would you bring up something like ‘technology from fallen UFOs’?”

Asaba felt like he was being made fun of. Deep within his heart, he took offense at their remarks. Yet, it wasn’t as if he had completely accepted the theory of ‘man-made UFOs’ as the truth. Slipping into the mood for self-torment:

“—right, I do have a photo, you know. Of those Foo Fighters. It’s just a printout from my computer but it’s quite famous.”

Asaba pulled out a binder notebook which he used to collect data for his articles from his bag.

He flipped through the contents of the file, rustling through its contents.

“Ah, there it is. Here.”

He unfolded the badly creased printout, which had been bundled up together with some suspiciously false-looking ghost photos, on his desk.

Nishikubo and Hanamura both leaned forward.

It was a typical picture of a UFO, a black and white image so fuzzy and out-of-focus that nobody would understand what was photographed if you didn’t explain it to them.

Nishikubo spoke first.

“What’s that? Which way is up?”

“Here, like this.”

Asaba turned the printout around so that Nishikubo was looking at it right side up.

“This is the one that was circulating on the Internet some time near the start of this year, which was a hot topic of discussion for a while. This is the ground, this is the sky, and those hazy shadows right in the middle over here are the Foo

Fighters. The photographer is unknown.”

“And this is the Yeti and this one over here is Nessie, right?” interjected Hanamura flippantly, but Nishikubo seemed to be studying the printout earnestly. Jabbing a finger at the shadows of the ‘Foo Fighters’:

“Are these the lights on an airplane’s wing tips?”

“Who knows?” said Asaba with a tilt of his head.

“I think this was taken from the west of the apron<sup>1</sup>, not too far away from the mountains where Chief and I was. There’s also a video being circulated online along with this image, but that video is even blurrier than this so you can’t see anything at all.”

“—maybe this really is just a plane. Anyway, in the first place, a blurry picture like this probably can’t explain anything properly.”

“Well, it’s true that even if we put aside UFO technology and stuff like that, it probably isn’t too strange that they’re doing tests for newly-developed secret military weapons. I mean, according to them, we *are* supposed to be on the brink of war.”

On the brink of war.

To Asaba’s generation, those were words people said in jest. Despite the fact that people have been saying ‘a war is coming soon’ since before he was born, the news on television has only reported repeated skirmishes with the enemy. There was no chance that a ‘real war’ will begin.

“That war probably won’t happen,” said Hanamura.

“I wonder if it will, though,” said Asaba.

At this point, Nishikubo said:

“But aerial bombing of the north recently started up again, didn’t it? There was a professor or someone like that who was saying that things are pretty serious this time around on the news this morning.”

However, Hanamura threw that notion out the window.

“But things like that happen all the time, don’t they? We would’ve looked

really stupid doing all these things if the war didn't happen, right? I mean, they even built a shelter in school and made us do emergency evacuation drills once a month, right?"

"Asaba."

Asaba and Nishikubo both lifted their heads at the same time.

It was Akiho.

"A moment."

She dragged Asaba off towards her seat without saying anything else. It was well known that Sudou Akiho was someone who did not hesitate to use force or violence if deemed necessary. It was because of her that even Hanamura did not dare to openly poke fun at Asaba.

"Why were you late today?"

"I wasn't. I barely made it in time, but I made it."

"Entering the classroom at the same time as Kawaguchi is the same as being late. You'll end up being preyed on like that."

With that, she pulled out a stack of papers clipped together from her bag and pushed it towards Asaba.

"What's this?"

"Wait a— You don't need to look at it here, okay? Put it away somewhere, quickly."

Asaba was dumbfounded.

It was a copy of the homework they were given for summer vacation.

With a pathetic, sheepish smile, Asaba said:

"—this will sell for a handsome price, I think."

"Of course. I think you already know not to, but don't copy it word for word, okay?"

"Erm..."

He was about to thank her but she whispered angrily, "I said, put it away

quickly!” He hurriedly stuffed the stack of papers down his collar into his shirt. “You mean you’re going to keep it there?” Akiho said as she eyed him derisively.

“—that’s right.”

It was then Asaba recalled something really important.

There was something he needed to ask Akiho.

“What?”

“Erm, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“I’m going to ask you something a little strange, but our school’s girls swimsuits...”

Akiho’s brow instantly became clouded, but Asaba readied himself for whatever that may come and continued speaking.

“It’s the one with a shoulder strap and a white line along this edge, right?”

“You seem to be awfully familiar with it. Why would you know something like that?”

Akiho stared right into Asaba’s face with a frown.

“Don’t tell me you peeped into the pool during our lesson—”

“No, I didn’t. I just need to go to the municipal pool and there’ll be many girls swimming there wearing the school’s swimsuit, right?”

Akiho glared at Asaba with a deeply suspicious look, but perhaps because she had accepted his explanation, she continued:

“And?”

“That swimsuit has a name tag across the chest area and the back, like your short-sleeved PE attire, right? Are those easy to remove?”

“What’s this about?”

“I’m just wondering whether those tags were held down by Velcro strips or hooks that you could take off in a jiffy if you felt like it, or whether they were

sewn on.”

Akiho thought for a moment.

“I think they’re sewn on normally. It’d be silly if they could come off easily, anyway. What’s with the sudden question though?”

It was a meaningful conclusion, but Asaba learned nothing new.

That girl seemed to be around his age. The swimsuit she was wearing was somehow the standard school-issued one. Yet, the design of the school’s swimsuit might just have resembled one from another school somewhere else.

Even without the name tag, it was possible that it was just a coincidence that she didn’t have her name tag on last night, if for some reason she was wearing a swimsuit from some new school somewhere.

He couldn’t say for sure.

Just then, the bell on the clock tower rang, signaling the start of the second period.

“—thanks.”

He meant to thank her for answering his question, not for giving him a copy of her homework. Deep in thought, he returned to his seat. As he expected, Nishikubo only observed him by throwing him brief sidelong glances but Hanamura pressed him unrelentingly, “Oi, what were you guys talking about?” However, Asaba did not seem to hear even half of what he was saying, so Hanamura eventually gave up. Everyone in his vicinity appeared to return to their seats in a manner that demonstrated their longing for summer vacation, now long gone.

Asaba thought to himself as he stared fixedly at a spot on his desk.

Who on earth was that girl?

Do go out before us. Those people outside won’t harm you.

That was what the mysterious person who appeared at the pool said.

And he did exactly as he was told.

It was alright because he could, even now, remember how abnormal the

situation was and how anxious and fearful he had felt. However, memories like that tend to fade over time.

Why didn't he say what he wanted to say at that time? Any time now, he would be tormented by feelings of regret.

But he shall put those feelings aside for the time being.

He had left through the changing room, leaving behind that girl with that man at the poolside.

That was the truth.

Waiting outside were large, white vans and men in black clothing. There were five or six vans and ten, perhaps twenty men. One of those men approached him and offered to drop Asaba off at his house if he was alright with it. He had spoken extremely courteously to Asaba. Perhaps he had made the offer because he felt sorry for not being able to explain anything to him, or perhaps he had felt that it would be more convenient for him if Asaba were to depart from the place as quickly as possible.

He had accepted the man's offer, forgetting about the bicycle he parked outside the video store.

He was urged into one of the vans that was parked nearby while still clutching his shoes, wearing his dripping wet shorts with his bag on his shoulders. He remembered pulling on a T-shirt from his bag after the car had left the school.

The chain of memories broke off, just about there.

He had no idea what happened after that.

When he came to his senses, he was sitting alone on a bench at a bus stop near his house.

He was wearing all of his clothes, while the bicycle which should have been at the video store was right next to him, attached to the legs of the bench with a bicycle chain lock. The clock at the bus-stop indicated that it was 2:10 AM.

Only now was he able to quietly recall the events of last night. But, at that time, he was so frightened that he had burst into tears.

It struck home just how frightening memory loss can be and how it was

nothing joke about. It wasn't as tranquil and romantic as how it went on television or in *manga*. He would never have thought that drawing a blank for just a couple of hours would be so terrifying. During that period of time, he had no idea what he did, nor could he be responsible for anything he did. Moreover, since he had no idea what had been done to him, he could not take anyone to task for anything either.

He was so petrified that he couldn't immediately recall what the number to his combination lock was. When he finally did, he fled for his dear life, pedaling furiously until he reached home.

It was an experience so harrowing that he couldn't even laugh it off.

"Hey! Everyone, get back to your seats!"

Nakagomi, the class president, was yelling. The two boys who were bouncing their rubber balls off each other's at the back of the classroom grumbled in discontent as they grudgingly shuffled back to their seats.

"Jeez, she sure is annoying."

"If these were different times, I bet Nakagomi would be the type of person that'll be the first to say, 'This is all for the sake of my country'."

Perhaps everything that happened last night was but a dream, Asaba thought as he stared at a fixed point on his desk.

In all honesty, he had a vague feeling that that really was the case. Everything was just so preposterously fantastical. A girl with silver metal spheres buried in both her wrists at the pool. A mysterious man along with the assemblage of men in black. Except for himself, the identity of everyone who appeared last night was unclear. He had zero tangible evidence. On top of that, he had no recollection of what happened after he was made to go into that van.

Even if he were to tell someone, no one would ever believe him.

After all, if someone were to tell him something similar, he would not have believed that person either.

In the first place, there is no credibility in a memory with a gap in it. He had no way to firmly insist that everything was completely and undeniably real,



even if everything that happened at the pool felt like it was completely, undeniably real.

He could think of it this way. His memory got mixed up somehow, and he had come to himself at a bus stop right next to his house. Only those two things were 'real', and the chain of events starting from around the time when he had sneaked into the pool was actually a 'dream'.

He could stretch it by saying that his jumbled-up memories and the dream that allowed him to escape reality was the result of mental and physical fatigue from being in the mountains, as well as stress from knowing that summer vacation was about to end and that he had yet to get any homework done.

That explanation put his mind at greater ease than to think of it all as a dream.

It made him feel much, much better than believing that something inexplicable had happened to him.

Nonetheless, there was a part of him which refused to be content with that peace of mind.

—you cowardly bastard. For heaven's sakes, wake up.

That part of him shouted at him.

—mental and physical fatigue, along with stress, you say? I see. And because you were fatigued and stressed there was nothing you could do despite what you saw or heard? What a convenient explanation for everything. Modern rationalism is a magical garbage bin that every household has armed themselves with, without fail. Do you intend to explain away everything using that bin?

Well then, listen here. You're just trying to pretend that nothing happened, because you gave in to fear after losing part of your memory. You want to believe that there was nothing worth worrying about. In order to make that possible, you're going to reconstruct your own homemade version of the day's events.

In terms of objectivity and reproducibility, there is scant difference between the 'psychological explanation' that you dragged out and things like divination

and old wives' remedies.

This is what those fellows were gunning for.

Don't be taken in by something like that.

Thinking that it was all a dream is equivalent to admitting defeat.

There was a bitter, lopsided smile on Asaba's lips. There was something wrong with him. When he said 'those fellows', who exactly was he referring to? Since when did it become a matter of victory or loss? That sounded exactly like what a fanatical believer of the paranormal would say.

Despite such thoughts—

The ripples reverberating across the inky surface of the water like radar waves, the swim cap she had put on in dead earnestness, the crimson of the bath towel stained with blood, that mysterious voice which sounded foreign no matter what she said, that slightly cheery expression of hers when she managed to swim fifteen meters with the kickboard, those black eyes peeking at him at point blank range along with the glimmer on the silver spheres on her wrists.

He was unable to believe that they were all a dream.

No matter how much the rational side of him tried to deny it, his feelings will not accept it.

Who on earth was that girl?

He wanted to know.

What would he do after he knew who she was? Did he even want to meet her again in the first place? He did not know.

Even so, he believed that Iriya had really been there.

"All rise."

The sliding door at the entrance of the classroom didn't slide well, which caused the sliding sound to grate on his ears.

Before he knew it, the entire class had risen at class president's command, one that was prone to false starts, and were lowering their heads. Only Asaba was still seated, and by the time he was scrambling to stand up everyone else

had already sat down. “Alrighty,” huffed Iizuka the math teacher as he climbed onto the podium with the unsteady, tottering steps of someone who had seemingly crawled out of his grave just a few moments ago. Throwing his textbook down onto the teacher’s desk, he went “Ah~~~” in a voice one would think a mummy approaching death would speak in, if it did try to speak.

It wasn’t as if the Grim Reaper had finally come to fetch him. He was simply trying to remember where he had left off in the previous lesson. What should have followed after his “Ah~~~” was his usual “Well then,” but he suddenly fell silent halfway through. Only the half of the class closer to the corridor heard the discrete knock on the door. The other half must have thought, “Oh, he died.”

The door opened a slit, and Kawaguchi Taizou’s face, which was thirty-five years of age and single, peered in.

“Iizuka-sensei. Could I have a moment, please?”

Iizuka uttered a sound which was probably something between an “Ah” and an “Oh”.

Asaba breathed a tiny sigh. Perhaps as Asaba had to deal with him all the time as a member of the Journalism Club, or perhaps it was already in his nature that he would be unable to see eye-to-eye with someone like him, it was just impossible for him to grow fond of this man called Kawaguchi, his homeroom teacher. Just looking at his face put him off, so Asaba avoided looking at him by immediately turning his gaze to his left, out the window that was thrown open.

What met his gaze was the view looking down from the second floor, from a window on the side of the school building facing the main gate. There wasn’t anything particularly interesting in this view. A row of cherry blossom trees as old as the school building, a stone plaque with a leftish-sounding slogan carved on it, a stone plaque with the leftish-sounding school song carved on it, the aging green paint on the roof over the main entrance. He slowly became aware of the cicadas’ warbling, which usually went unnoticed as background noise. The summer sunlight cast no shadows, while the gravel-covered car park was empty save for a white van enveloped in shimmering heat waves, a van that seemed really familiar...

He froze.

That man was there.

The very man who had appeared by the poolside and told him the story about the querulous old janitor, who was young but seemed to be masking the weariness of an old man under his demeanor, was standing right there, beside the white van.

He was wearing a suit similar to the one he had on last night with his jacket thrown over his shoulder like before, but he was now wearing a necktie he didn't have on previously. He was looking up at the school building, with a hand held up over his forehead to shield his eyes.

The man spotted Asaba almost immediately. "What an unexpected surprise!" his face said, as a smile broke out across his face the same way it did last night. He waved to Asaba just once, from right to left.

Kawaguchi was saying something. His voice automatically entered his ears.

"Ah, due to certain circumstances we were unable to make it in time for homeroom period, so we had to borrow a bit of time from Iizuka-sensei's lesson."

The cicadas' warbling grew louder and louder.

What he felt wasn't something as simple as a sense of foreboding.

Bit by bit.

Bit by bit.

Asaba slowly turned back to face the classroom.

Iriya Kana

Her name was written neatly on the blackboard.

That girl was standing on the podium. She was wearing a brand-new summer uniform, carrying a bag so shiny that it looked like it belonged to a freshman. She wore a pair of indoor school shoes that had never been into a shoe locker along with wristbands on her wrists.

The cicadas' warbling became even louder.

Kawaguchi seemed to be saying something. *I would like to introduce to you a new transfer student*, were the words he seemed to be mouthing, but Asaba could no longer hear what he was saying. He could not hear the general hubbub in the classroom either.

Only that clumsy sounding voice of hers, the voice that made her sound like she was saying those words for the first time, was crystal clear.

"My name is Iriya, Kana."

Somewhere in his heart, he believed that to be a false name.

There were cicadas in his head.

The girl said her name before bowing in a way that made him feel like she had practiced this countless of times and this was the culmination of her efforts.

Then, she stared right at the seat next to the window, at Asaba who was unable to lift even a finger.

If you were to think about, it was obvious that she would look at him.

It would seem that summer vacation had ended, but summer had not.

Summer will continue for a while longer.

It was the summer of UFOs.

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**Translation Notes:**

<sup>1</sup> Airport apron: Wikipedia link [here](#)

# Chapter 2 – Love Letter

## (Part 1)

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That must be it.

That girl must be an alien, and Chief was right after all. Sonohara Air Base is a UFO base, a place for UFOs from faraway places in the universe to land secretly on Earth. Aliens and the top brass in the government have been sitting around the same table and communicating with each other. The top brass in the government must have worked themselves up in a frenzy trying to obtain the advanced technology the aliens have.

As a matter of fact, the aliens will say something like, “In the event you humans cease making war and achieve world peace, we will offer you all the technology we possess and Earth will become a member of the cosmic society” in voices that sounded like they had inhaled helium. No matter what book he read, it was always like this. Aliens always seemed awfully concerned about peace on Earth, so the aliens must have said the same thing to those important people in the government up in the north.

That was the reason why war was always on the verge of erupting, but never actually did. To both military camps, alien technology might be the trump card that would decide the outcome of the battle. Both sides must be thinking, if we were to cause any trouble for our opponent we might as well wait till we get our hands on that technology first. The stalemate dragged on for a long time, and the aliens finally took action.

They released, into every corner of human society, a multitude of agents that assumed the form of humans. Their only mission was to ascertain the true nature of humans with their very own eyes, whether they were an intelligent peace-loving race or an uncivilized race spending all their time killing each other. If the investigation concludes the latter, Earth will immediately be blown to smithereens by the alien force’s superweapons. There was no doubt about that. The girl who identified herself as Iriya is definitely one of those agents.

One who oversaw “middle school students”.

He remembered practically nothing about the following lesson. The bell signaling the end of the second period rang, Iizuka returned to his graveyard, and the blackboard eraser wiped away the numbers above his right shoulder.

Asaba was unable to escape the quagmire of his thoughts, frozen in position as he held on to his cheap-looking mechanical pencil with the eraser missing in his sloppy grasp. He stared at the blank pages of his notebook which he had opened but could not write a single word in, feeling as if he had been clipped off from recess time, from reality, and stuck firmly to his seat by the window in a poor-quality collage. No matter how hard he tried, he was unable to wipe the words ‘Iriya Kana’ from the blackboard inside his head.

“Oi, Asaba!”

Someone poked his forehead. Right in front of his eyes was Hanamura’s face. Hanamura, who was sitting on his chair, turned back to face him, leaning himself so far out so that he loomed above Asaba. “Heh heh,” he guffawed evilly as he peered into Asaba’s face.

“What are you looking so zoned out for? Is it that? The beginning of a chapter titled ‘That girl was the transfer student who caught my eye’?”

Speak of hitting the bull’s eye. Well, he did, but then again it wasn’t too far a shot.

“S-Shut up.”

Nishikubo suddenly plonked an arm onto Asaba’s shoulders.

“Show some restraint, okay? If you do something like invite her to join the Journalism Club, Sudou might stab you.”

Asaba became even more flurried. He shook himself free of Nishikubo’s arm.

“A-Akiho doesn’t particularly care.”

Hanamura dropped his chin into his hands. He had a ghost of a smile on his lips and, like the clammy fingers of a molester, his lascivious gaze searched the back of the classroom.

“You can’t. *That* sort isn’t the correct type for the Journalism Club. Even more

so now that your newspaper is called the ‘Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper.’”

Nishikubo followed Hanamura’s line of sight and muttered: “Ah well. He’s right.”

Asaba tried to summon some courage from the pit of his stomach and lifted his head, slowly turning to face the back of the classroom.

There she was.

There was a seat right at the back of the classroom, in the second row from the corridor. Beside that seat, “in the third row from the corridor” was a seat that did not exist just an hour ago. In it sat neither dream nor illusion, but Iriya.

She was just sitting there without doing anything. With downcast eyes, she stared, almost unblinkingly, at her empty desk. She gave off the vibes of an animal that would not resist capture, but one that would not grow accustomed to her captors, either.

—my name is Iriya, Kana.

“Ah, want to hear something surprising? Iriya-kun has just returned from abroad.”

So claimed Kawaguchi Taizou, single and thirty-five years of age, from beside Iriya, who had her head lowered in a bow.

With the callousness of someone dissecting a frog, he went on to give a brief explanation of her past. Both her parents have passed on, he said, and she lives with her brother who works in the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force. That was the reason why she had been living in an army base up till now, but, with the permanent transfer of her brother back to Sonohara, she returned to Japan and now she resides in the living quarters of the Sonohara Air Base. —ah, since that’s how it is, I think Iriya still hasn’t gotten used to the life of a middle school student in Japan. I hope that everyone will give her advice when it comes to things like that. Understand?

Asaba did not.

He did not think that Kawaguchi’s explanation was altogether false.

However, that explanation did not at all mesh with what happened at the



pool last night. The sirens blasting from the patrol cars from the very beginning, Iriya's slim shoulders as she watched the surface of the pool, the appearance of the mysterious man who called himself Iriya's elder brother, the group of men in black surrounding the pool, his lapse in his memory after that, and hidden behind wristbands, those silver...

"—want to try licking them?"

"—I wonder if we could taste electricity," muttered Asaba, and both Hanamura and Nishikubo exchanged glances before exclaiming, "Huh?" at the same time.

"Eh? Oh, no, that was..."

From behind Asaba, Nishikubo abruptly laid both his hands on Asaba's head and started pushing apart his hair at where it parted.

"You know, perhaps there's a chance that your brains got fried too after your trip into the mountains?"

"Stop it, you ass-face," said Asaba, shaking free of his hands.

It was then Hanamura went "Oi, look at that. Which class are those guys from? Looks like the rumors have already spread."

Peeking through the door at the entrance of the classroom were the faces of boys from some other class throwing hungry looks Iriya's way.

Hanamura snickered.

"They look exactly like they had a treat snatched from right under their noses."

Upon hearing that, Nishikubo suddenly made a face that said "Ah," as if he had suddenly recalled something.

"—I see, I see. I remember now. Those guys are probably from Class 2-1."

Nishikubo and Hanamura looked at him with expressions that clearly said, *what's that about?*

"Like I said, having a treat snatched from right under their noses. Do you know Mogami from Class 2-1?"

Asaba shook his head.

Hanamura replied, “Nope, don’t know him.”

Nishikubo continued quickly, “Before summer vacation, he was blowing his own trumpet, saying that he knew of plans for a female student to transfer here once vacation ended.”

Before Asaba could say anything, Hanamura interjected:

“—huh, then, was Iriya actually supposed to join Class 2-1?”

“Probably. Remember how her seat wasn’t prepared beforehand? Kawaguchi had to make the person on duty get it for her. If they had decided to have her join our class from the very start, they would prepare her seat in advance, right? I’m sure there was a sudden change in plans for some reason.”

“What reason?”

“As if I’d know that much!”

For some reason, he had said. To Asaba, those words held tremendous weight, making him bow his head as the terrifying things he had imagined earlier on coiled themselves around his thoughts. Unbeknownst to anyone, an unhealthy sweat was slowly trickling down his back.

Maybe it was because of what happened at the pool last night.

Maybe the reason was that he was “the first middle school student she had met”. Therefore, he had been assigned to Iriya as her “first significant subject of investigation”. What should he do, no, what could he do now? He wanted her to investigate someone else instead. Like Nishikubo. Hanamura may be a prickly one. If Chief had been chosen as a subject of investigation, the annihilation of mankind would have taken place five seconds ago.

Despite Asaba’s anguish, Nishikubo and Hanamura continued to gawk at Iriya as they continued:

“—somehow, she seems strange.”

“I’ll forgive her for that since she’s cute.”

“Maybe her Japanese isn’t that good?”

“I’ll forgive her for that since she’s cute.”

“Oh, oh. Look at that. They’re trying to land in the face of the enemy. As one would expect of our esteemed class president!”

Asaba couldn’t brush that one aside.

Reflexively, he turned back to look. A combined friendly fleet of four girls with the class president of Class 2-4, Nakagomi Makiko, as their tactical command ship was marching resolutely through the sea of desks, chairs and hushed voices with their sights set on “Iriya” island.

Alerted to the presence of an “enemy” about three desks away, Iriya lifted her head abruptly and fixed her unfathomable gaze on Nakagomi.

Yet, Nakagomi did not flinch away from that gaze.

Everyone was following them with the corners of their eyes, waiting to see how things would unfold. They lowered their voices in order to not miss a single word, causing the break-time din in the classroom to seemingly melt away into the distance.

Amidst all that, Asaba was beside himself with worry. Stop it Nakagomi, what do you plan to do with our planet Earth?

Nakagomi then stood right in front of Iriya:

“Erm, hey.”

Her voice trailed off, and Nakagomi secretly took a deep breath. She put on a smile, which seemed awfully strained.

“I’m Nakagomi Makiko, the class president, so if you have anything to ask feel free to look for me.”

Iriya remained completely silent.

Assertive as Nakagomi was, she faltered, and her three friends hurried to back her up. They took turns introducing themselves before launching successive impromptu attacks.

Where did you live before this? My English is really bad so teach me sometime, okay? I also transferred over here when I was in primary school, you

know. Is your brother good looking?

Iriya looked down.

Perhaps that stirred up the girls' feelings of "we have to do something for her", as rapid-fire questions continued to fly back and forth.

Yet, Iriya maintained her silence. Not knowing what to do without a response to their questions, the girls started talking among themselves, occasionally brandishing a "Don't you think so too?" at Iriya. However, Iriya seemed to withdraw deeper and deeper into her trench with each successive remark and the girls who were chasing her down somehow lost sight of when to pull back.

Just looking at them would make your insides hurt, but Asaba felt like his hair would completely turn white. It felt like an eternity had passed when in actual fact, only the length of time one would have taken to go to the washroom and back had edged by.

Iriya finally lifted her face.

The girls' conversation broke off, and it was plain that every eye in the classroom was fixed on Iriya's next move. Wincing at the attention she was getting, like a person who was drowning, her desperate gaze searched the classroom and somehow came to rest on the seat next to the window shortly after.

Buzzing noises begin to fill the classroom.

It was immediately obvious who she was looking at.

Iriya was clearly looking at Asaba, as if she was asking him for help.

"Oi," whispered Hanamura. Nishikubo cast him a sidelong glance. Yet, for a brief moment, Asaba could not locate his tongue. He dropped the mechanical pencil which he had been holding throughout the second period onto his notebook, quietly pulling his chair back as he stood up. In the midst of all the attention that seemed to have been transferred from Iriya to him, Asaba said, to no one in particular:

"Washroom."



After that, Asaba really did go to the washroom.

Even though no one was looking at him, he holed himself up in one of the washroom's cubicles and sat on the toilet bowl with his pants and briefs neatly pulled down. Perhaps he simply wanted to compress his lie into something as small as possible.

With his bare ass sticking out, Asaba sat there, brooding.

With a ratio of nine parts to one, he was thinking about how pathetic he was, and how annoyed he was with Iriya.

However, he had not been brooding for long before the bell signaling the start of the third period rang. With a heavy sigh, Asaba pulled up pants which he did not actually need to pull down, flushed the toilet which did not actually need flushing, and washed his hands, which did not actually need washing. With unsteady steps, he made his way out of the washroom.

"You big coward."

Akiho was lying in wait for him outside.

"A-About what?"

Asaba put on a brave front. What could he have done? "It's easy for you to talk, since it didn't happen to you," was what he felt like saying, but the scary look on Akiho's face made him decide not to say anything unnecessary.

"—The bell rang and we really need to go back to the classroom, so..."

Akiho paid no heed to what he said.

"Do you know that girl?"

"No, not exactly..." said Asaba, before his tongue became so thick he could hardly breathe.

"Then what was that just now?"

In any case, he must throw Akiho off his scent for now.

"I really don't know her. I was away in the mountains with Chief for the whole of the summer vacation, and Kawaguchi said she had just recently returned from abroad, right?"

Akiho glared at Asaba with a deeply suspicious look and out of the blue, she said:

“It was the pool, right?”

Asaba thought his heart would pop right out of his mouth.

“Before first period started, you were asking this and that about the school’s swimming costume. And, unlike Chief, you did return home every now and then, so I guess you must have met her at the municipal pool or somewhere else. And, she must have been wearing a swimming costume without a name tag at that time. Huh—so was that what happened? *Hmmm?*”

Well, Akiho could think whatever she liked. Or so Asaba thought.

Perhaps satisfied by her own explanation, the severe look on Akiho’s face softened a little.

“Is she weak in Japanese? Did you talk to her?”

She was asking something similar to what Nishikubo had asked.

Most people would think the same way, with her reticence on top of the fact that she was a student who had returned from abroad.

Asaba’s head was reeling.

“I wonder—”

He was getting wobbly on his feet.

“What’s that? Speak clearly! You spoke to her at least once, right? Hey, hang on Asaba, are you okay? You’re white as a sheet.”

It happened in a flash.

He was assaulted with a wave of dizziness so intense that the sky and ground seemed to switch places. Unable to stand, he dropped into a crouch. He felt really sick, like he was having a combination of both motion sickness and influenza. Desperately, he fought to overcome the mounting nausea.

“Are you okay?! Hey Asaba, what’s wrong?!”

Akiho was panicking. At the very edge of his fast narrowing field of vision, Asaba could see the other students walking along the corridor stop in surprise.

Somewhere in his heart, he thought, it's embarrassing, don't yell like that, but Asaba had not the strength to say so. A cold sweat broke out on his face.

He took deep breaths, one after the other.

And, as suddenly as it came, the nausea quickly ebbed away.

Somehow managing to stand up, he wiped the sweat from his brow and was surprised at how cold his face felt. He still felt the aftereffects of the dizzy spell, but he felt a lot better now.

"I'm fine," said Asaba, but, to Akiho, he was now deathly pale instead of just pale.

"No you're not! Let's go to the infirmary! I'll take you there!" said Akiho as she grabbed onto Asaba's hand.

It was true that he should probably go to the infirmary.

But he didn't think it was so bad that Akiho had to accompany him there.

"Class is starting soon so go back to the class. Please, I can go there by myself."

Akiho paid no heed to his words. She started walking at a brisk pace, tugging on Asaba's hand.

Sonohara Middle School's corridors was traditionally messy. Empty boxes of teaching aids sat in piles along the walls, mops and buckets which couldn't quite fit into the lockers stood in a row, and 'we are looking for new members' posters which were never taken down fluttered in the wind, beckoning at everyone who passed them by.

Before the door to the infirmary lay a stretch of connecting corridor, which lead to the gymnasium. The door was hard to miss as there was a signboard over it with a logo that read "Refined Sake • Tenouyama". That signboard was what was left of the girls' basketball team's matchmaking pub from last year's school festival. By the side of the door was a label that read, 'Fire Warden • Shiina Mayumi'.

Akiho pushed opened the door with all her strength.

"Excuse me!"

Tugging Asaba along, who stumbled in after her, she rushed into the infirmary and nearly ran straight into three male students standing on the other side of the door.

“There now, the next lesson is starting soon so run along. Shoo!”

Shiina Mayumi was pushing on the backs of said three male students with both her hands. Standing in the middle was Funatsu, who was Asaba’s classmate last year. He greeted Asaba with a genial “Yo,” but his eyes grew round when he noticed how Asaba looked.

“What’s with that face of yours?”

Was he still that pale? Asaba thought to himself.

Shiina Mayumi took one look at his face and went, “Whoops, this one doesn’t look like he’s pretending.”

“Uwa, that’s mean, we’re sick too okay,” protested Funatsu and his gang with sappy smiles, but Shiina Mayumi ignored them as she said:

“You’re really annoying. Idiots pretending to be sick should leave now, so go!”

In a blink of an eye, the three of them found themselves kicked out of the infirmary, the door shut firmly behind their backs. She was quite used to handling them now since they did the same thing every recess.

When asked for their opinion of Shiina Mayumi, most students in Sonohara Middle School will claim that she is ‘a great beauty if you look closely’. She does not stand out very much for she wore no makeup and was always in her white coat. On top of that, she often uses rough language and would say things like ‘butt’ and ‘dick’ without batting an eyelid.

She came to this school about a month before the beginning of the summer vacation to replace Kurobe-sensei, who took a long leave of absence to recuperate from an illness. Male and female students alike would say to her, “If only you would dress up a little more, you’ll look really good”, but she paid them no need. Day after day, she would stuff both hands into the pockets of her white coat and happily walk around the school with her slippers, making slapping noises on the pavement as she walked.



“Erm,”

Before Akiho could finish her sentence, Shiina Mayumi interrupted her loudly.

“Wait! Let me guess.”

She scrunched up her forehead as she stared intently at Asaba’s face. After ten or fifteen seconds of careful deliberation, she nodded as if she had come to an indisputable conclusion. Pointing a stern finger at Asaba, she said flatly:

“Paint thinner.”

“N-No that’s not it!” said Akiho, raising her voice, before throwing Asaba a sideward glance.

“It’s not, right?”

“No, I haven’t been snuffing thinner.”

He thought he should probably explain his situation himself: “—erm, I suddenly felt really sick just now, and I even felt like throwing up.”

Akiho cut in, “It was really sudden, and he was even paler than he is now.”

Shiina Mayumi calmly made Asaba sit on the stool. She sat down on a folding chair, facing Asaba.

“There isn’t much color in your face even now, you know? Did you eat breakfast before coming to school?”

Asaba nodded, and said, “But I feel much better, and I don’t feel like throwing up anymore.”

“I think it’ll be better if you lay down for a bit. What’s your name and class? I’ll inform your teacher for you.”

Before Asaba could open his mouth, Akiho answered her.

“Asaba Naoyuki from Class 2-4.”

Shiina Mayumi pulled out a ballpoint pen from her pocket and started to leaf through the pages of her string-bound name register, but then she suddenly furrowed her brows. She muttered, “Asaba?” and without warning, she bellowed, “You’re kidding me, Asaba-kun? You’re Asaba-kun? Asaba-kun from Class 2-4?”

Her voice was so loud that Asaba and Akiho unwittingly leaned away from her.

Shiina Mayumi seemed to have come to some sort of understanding as she muttered, “Huh... So that’s how it is...” She leaned forward, eyes brimming with such curiosity that Asaba unconsciously shrank away from her. With a smug smile on her face, she continued to mutter to herself, “Huh... I see, I see, so you’re Asaba-kun. Hmmm...”

Suddenly, she exclaimed “Oh!” as if she had suddenly recalled something very important. “That means, you are *that* Asaba-kun, aren’t you?! That Asaba-kun who wasn’t feeling well?! Are you okay?!” she asked.

—what is wrong with this person?

Asaba sat there in dumbfounded silence. Akiho probably got worried upon seeing Shiina Mayumi in her flustered state.

“E-Erm, is there anything wrong?”

“Huh? Oh no, it’s nothing. Erm, I’ve now placed Asaba in my custody, so you should return to your classroom now. Lessons should have started already anyway. Okay?”

Making full use of the skill she honed every day, she pushed on Akiho’s back with both hands. Akiho looked like she still had something to say, but she was chased out of the infirmary, and the door was firmly shut on her.

Shiina Mayumi spun around to face Asaba, and, with a grim expression on her face completely different from the one she wore up to then...

“—I shall ask you this again for good measure. You are Asaba Naoyuki-kun from Sonohara Middle School, Class 2-4, seat number one, am I correct?”

“Yes. That’s right.”

Her dour tone was making Asaba feel uneasy. Shiina Mayumi bit on her lip and looked up at the ceiling, seemingly engrossed in her own thoughts. Once again, she turned to Asaba and asked:

“You suddenly felt unwell and experienced nausea, right?”

“—yes.”

Shiina Mayumi plopped herself down on the folding chair facing Asaba. With some rough handling, she measured Asaba's pulse and pulled up his eyelids to look into his pupils. A sigh escaped her as she sat back into her chair.

"Now, I'll be doing a check. I'll be asking you a couple of questions, and I would like you to answer them. These questions are different from the ones asked during a normal medical examination. But, in a sense, they are alike in that the results of the test won't be correct if you don't answer the questions honestly. Understand?"

Asaba nodded.

The first question was:

"What's today's date?"

The sudden question caught him off guard, and he couldn't answer her. Her stare only made him even more nervous. He thought, how sly you must be to catch me by surprise with that, and the seconds ticked by while he entertained that thought.

"Ah, erm, today is, oh, the first day of the second semester, so it's the first of September."

It took him a full ten seconds to finally come up with that answer.

The next question came before he had even the time to take a breath.

"Do you have any chronic ailments?"

"Huh? Ah, I don't have any. None."

"Then, you don't take any medicine regularly, do you?"

"Erm, I occasionally take things like Vitamin C. The powdered sort. My father likes stuff like that."

"C, as in ascorbic acid?"

"Ah, erm, I don't really know much about things like that."

"What do you get when you add seventeen to twenty-six?"

Once again, he was caught off guard, and he could only answer her after twenty seconds.

“—thirty, no, forty. Forty-three? Erm, excuse me, you won’t ask me to re-do all the questions from the beginning, will you...”

“Do you have any allergies?”

“Eh? No, I don’t, I think.”

“Tell me who the head teacher of this school is.”

“Murayama Kanji.”

He somehow managed an immediate answer to that one. Without any time to even pat himself on the back,

“When you started to feel unwell, did you also experience a severe bout of dizziness?”

“Eh, yes.”

“Did your face and limbs grow cold?”

“They did. It’s better now, though.”

And then...

“What day is the twenty-fourth of June?”

Asaba was sure that it was a test to assess the psychological condition of the patient.

It was likely that dummy questions were mixed in with the real ones so that the patient would not know which were which. Either that, or there were no ‘dummy’ or ‘real’ questions. Instead, questions on different topics were asked one after the other with the aim of making the patient think. Maybe the answers didn’t really matter, and what was important was the patient’s reactions to the questions. Without them knowing, their hands might start shaking. Or their eyes might start looking around restlessly.

However.

Even so.

“—that, about that question, does it really have to be the twenty-fourth of June?”

His question was answered with another question instead.

“Did you experience heart palpitations when you started to feel unwell?”

“I don’t think I did.”

“Which will you take a photo of, spherical plasma, mirages, or weather balloons?”

“—huh?”

“Mantell. Chiles Whitted. What comes next?”

Asaba seemed to have heard of that before, and the answer to that question rolled about his head before rolling out. These were the three greatest UFO sightings in history; the Captain Mantell plane crash, the Chiles Whitted eyewitness report...

And the Gorman air battle.

“When you felt unwell, did your vision go white, did you see lights blinking in your vision, or anything like that?”

“—no.”

“Who’s that person who has been standing behind you since just now?”

Asaba couldn’t move.

“What about hallucinations or voices in your head? Have you ever thought that you might have seven fingers? Have you ever heard a voice negotiating for the extraction of your viscera? Do you feel like you have heard of the term ‘Coiled Adamski Spinal Receptors’ before?”

Outside the infirmary, the cicadas were warbling.

—what’s wrong with this person?

Outside the window, the sunlight was so harsh and pervasive that any silhouettes seemed to melt into its whiteness.

The interior of the infirmary was dimly-lit and unnaturally cool. Floating in the air was the faint smell of old medicine. Without a sound, the curtain at the window billowed in the wind, fluttering about like a ghost. The Red Cross symbol which he saw everywhere could very well be traps designed to give

victims a false sense of security. There were notices warning about the dangers of smoking alongside colored photos of lesion-covered lungs pasted everywhere, tiled walls reminiscent of operating rooms, beds containing no hint of warmth whatsoever, cupboards containing rows of glass bottles in colors so garish they looked venomous, a large pair of tweezers which held neither blood nor tears, distilled water from East Asia which you would not want to even approach, and a white sink which had, with a straight face, captured perhaps a couple hundred people's worth of vomit and excretion.

Just think about it.

Before he knew it, Kurobe-sensei had disappeared.

On a long leave of absence to recuperate from an illness.

Even though he seemed so healthy.

Shiina Mayumi came to this school to replace him and became an instant celebrity.

Was this all an alien conspiracy?

Perhaps, this was an antiseptic hell reeking of medicine? Who knows, maybe the person in front of him was an agent for the aliens, too. Shiina Mayumi really was a great beauty if you looked at her up close. She seemed to have understood what he had said, and she was also popular with both the boys and the girls. But.

Just maybe, when no one was looking, her head would crack open and wriggling tentacles would pop out.

And maybe, when night falls, this infirmary is where UFOs bring people they have abducted. Then, Shiina Mayumi-sensei, with her slippers making slapping noises and her tentacles wriggling about would perform hair-raising human experiments and blood will splatter and spray as she—

“—Asaba-kun? Hey, Asaba-kun, are you feeling okay?! Are you feeling unwell again?!”

What made Asaba come to his senses was not the loud voice calling his name, nor was it the fact that Shiina Mayumi had grabbed his shoulders, and was

shaking him violently, but the faint whiff of shampoo from Shiina Mayumi's hair. That was how close her face was, but she brought her face even closer still. Her forehead was now touching his, checking if he had a fever. Suddenly feeling embarrassed, Asaba pulled away.

“—I-I'm okay I'm alright. Err, I was just in a bit of a daze, that's all.”

“You sure?”

Shiina Mayumi stared intently at Asaba, with an extremely worried expression on her face.

“—okay then, look at this.”

A ballpoint pen was pushed in front of his eyes. The ballpoint pen had a clear plastic body, and on it was a blonde-haired girl in a red swimsuit. That swimsuit was made from fine sand, which was stained red, and before Asaba's eyes, the sand flowed down and the girl became buck naked. Asaba began pondering the meaning of life.

“I'm going to move this ballpoint pen, so follow the movement of the pen with your eyes.”

Shiina Mayumi moved the pen upwards, downwards, left and right, and observed the movements of Asaba's eyes.

Asaba tried his focus his attention on the tip of the moving ball point pen. However, after just a short while, pain began to ooze from deep within his eyes.

“Does your head hurt?”

Asaba nodded.

Shiina Mayumi placed her right hand on Asaba's face, as if to blindfold him. Her left hand went onto the back of his head. The moment she tilted his chin upwards, the pain in his eyes seemed to fade away.

“It doesn't hurt now, right?”

Asaba nodded.

Shiina Mayumi once again looked up at the ceiling while mulling over something, breathed a small sigh as she seemed to have come to some sort of

conclusion. Looking all fired up, she went “Alright!” as she stood from her chair.

“I think you’re okay now. But, it’ll be better if you lay down and rest for a while. You should do that, and drink this, too. You’ll be able to sleep well.” It was a tone of voice that suggested he had no say in the matter.

Two yellow tablets and a cup of barley tea were held out to him, and, pressured by the forcefulness of her tone, he did as he was told. Slowly, he laid on the bed and covered himself with the laid-out blanket.

“Rest for a while, okay?” said Shiina Mayumi as she drew the partition curtains shut with a flourish.

He began to feel sleepy the instant his head touched the pillow. It was too soon for the medicine to have taken effect, but perhaps it already had. Either that, or he was unaware of how physically exhausted he was.

On the other side of the partition curtain, Shiina Mayumi muttered under her breath, “— Oh for *fuck’s* sake.”

Asaba heard her shuffle across the room with her slippers and sit heavily in her chair. He also heard her pick up the telephone, and the sounds of her pressing the buttons so violently that the telephone rattled with each jab. Asaba was slowly succumbing to drowsiness, but from somewhere within his disappearing consciousness, he strained to catch every sound from the other side of the curtain.

Shiina-sensei was calling someone.

He thought she was going to contact the teacher of his third-period class to tell him that he will be absent, but he was wrong. The number she punched had too many digits. She had called someone outside the school, but, of course, he didn’t know who she called.

He was so sleepy.

The receiver of the call was immediately identified.

“—hello. I’m Shiina from the back-up team. Yes, the one from the infirmary—I know, you don’t need to tell me that. Just get me Enomoto, and—excuse me? Hello?!”



“The cheek of him to hang up on me,” Asaba heard her muttering to herself. She slammed the phone back down on its hook, and started to violently punch another number. A little while later...

“Don’t mess with me, you bastard! Look here, you must have a death wish for hanging up on your superior you shithead!! Oh, shut your trap I don’t need your concern, just get me Eno-, Ah — *fuck*!! Fine!! I’ll take responsibility if someone says anything to you about this so just get me Enomoto, now!!”

Under a thick layer of sleep, Asaba felt a twinge of dazed surprise.

He wondered who Enomoto was.

A long time passed before ‘Enomoto’ answered the phone.

“—do you have any idea why I’m calling?”

Almost immediately after...

“No, you idiot! The only person who would do that during work hours is you!”

A pause.

Shiina Mayumi laughed scornfully.

“So, you’re going to play dumb. That’s fine, I’ll give you a hint. Who do you think is here now, at the infirmary?”

A short while after...

“There should be a limit to how much you can feign ignorance! You used the Mist Cocktail on Asaba last night, didn’t you?! Why did you do something so dangerous?! Because of that thing many people have already—”

Asaba was already sinking into sleep, but his consciousness resurfaced a little upon hearing his name.

“Saying that you didn’t know won’t solve anything!! If by any chance *that* should happen, how were you planning to take responsibility for it?! If you wanted to plant a bug in him there should be other, better ways—”

She was suddenly cut off as the man on the phone tried to explain himself, and Asaba cocked his ears in order to hear him. It was a very, very long explanation.

Not long after.

“—and? What did you put in him?”

A one-word answer.

“I see.”

Another pause.

“—no. I think you chose the safe option. I would have done the same, too.”

The chair scraped against the floor as she stood up. Her slippers slapped against the floor as she paced the room. Perhaps she was walking while holding onto the phone as her voice started to drift towards the window.

“Eh, that’s not right. If the bug had hit, he would have been dead a long time ago. I’d have to do a thorough investigation before I can be completely sure, but I think those were flashbacks from the mist.”

Yet another pause.

The sound of the window being shut.

A while later.

“Of course, you moron! Anyway, let me just tell you one thing. Right now, I’m merely a school nurse in a middle school and I hide in the toilets and shoot glucose up my veins to deal with my hangovers in the mornings. I’m perfectly fine if you’re fine with everything going public and your plans going to waste, but it’ll never work out if you were to ask me to somehow try to treat shock due to Mist overdose with antiseptic fluid and dyspepsia medication. It’ll only create trouble for me if you think I’m that reliable. And let this be the last time, ever, that I’ll have trouble trying to contact you. You got me?”

And, without waiting even a second for his reply, she slammed down the phone with the force of someone landing a punch.

The infirmary returned to silence.

With her back facing the light streaming in from the window, one could faintly make out Shiina Mayumi’s silhouette from the other side of the partition curtain. She seemed to be looking at Asaba through the curtain, as her

silhouette stood there staring down at where his pillow was.

Finally, she said:

“—Asaba-kun? Are you awake?”

Silence.

“You know, about Kana-cha-”

She hesitated to finish, before continuing, as if she was talking to herself.

“Please be good friends with Iriya-san, okay?”

By then, Asaba was already sound asleep.

## (Part 2)

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He woke because he felt warm.

The dust specks floating about were glittering in the sun. Whilst he slept, the sunlight from the window had completely changed angles. It now shone through the partition curtain, scorching the side of his face. Asaba sat up, shielding his eyes with both hands as he kicked aside his blanket which was damp with sweat.

He didn't feel sick nor dizzy anymore. He seemed to remember having a dream about quarreling with someone over the phone, though.

“—Shiina-sensei?”

He poked his head out from between the curtains, but Shiina Mayumi was nowhere to be found. A look at the clock on the wall gave him a little of a startle. Lunch break was over and the fifth period had already started.

He didn't quite feel like returning to the classroom and toyed briefly with the thought of going straight home.

Leaving a note on Shiina Mayumi's desk that said: “I have returned to the classroom” despite his thoughts, Asaba left the infirmary and slowly walked along the deserted corridor, unable to make up his mind about whether he should go to class. Today was Wednesday; fifth period on Wednesday was English and the English teacher Kishimoto was a really nasty lady.

Maybe it would have been wiser to remain in the infirmary until after the fifth period had ended—by the time that thought crossed his mind, he was already in front of his classroom.

The classroom was empty.

Written boldly in chalk on the blackboard were the words ‘English class will be held in the audio-visual room’.

Asaba thought about how he seemed to have no luck with lessons today and how his laudable effort at dragging himself to class had gone to waste.

He should have gone home after all.

Steeling his resolve, he began packing up, determined to go home. Lessons in the audio-visual room sounded nice, but it usually meant being shown a movie with the subtitles switched off and being made to write one's opinions in an English essay. In other words, it was a skive-off session for the teacher. Furthermore, since it was the fifth period, about half the class would be nodding off by now. The only person who would be able to hand in a decent essay would probably be Iriya. After all, Iriya was a student who recently came back from abroad—

His hands, still in the midst of packing up, paused.

Asaba slowly lifted his head and looked towards the back of the classroom.

There stood Iriya's desk.

There was not a soul in the classroom. The slanted rays of sunlight streaming in from the window made the dim classroom look even gloomier. The gentle breeze blowing from the window brought with it heat from the outside.

A sinister thought sneaked into his head.

Asaba slowly made his way to Iriya's desk. Anxiety began swirling in the pit of his stomach, making his insides feel heavier as his heart began to beat faster. What are you thinking you idiot, stop it, this will end badly—a voice was shouting at him inside his head, but Asaba's pace quickened instead. Placing his hands on Iriya's desk, he once again looked around him, even though there was no one in the classroom. His eyes fell onto the clock on the wall.

Three minutes.

He had a time limit of three minutes. After three minutes, he would wrap up whatever he was doing, even if he found nothing.

Commence operation.

He pulled out the chair and peered under the desk. It was empty. He took her brand-new school bag off its hook and placed it flat on the desk. There were no stickers on it, nor were there any sort of charm hanging from it. The name card holder, which the majority of the student body had removed from their bags

because “it’s ugly and gets in the way”, was still on its handle, but her name, address, phone number and blood type was not written on the card inside.

He placed his fingers onto the clasp on the cover flap. The voice in his head turned desperate. This is for your own good so stop this already; this really is very dangerous; you already got into so much trouble since last night; don’t you know by now that you’re already up to your neck in mud? You aren’t some child in primary school who just became aware of the opposite sex; this is completely different from general mischief like sucking on the recorder belonging to a girl you like! The person you are dealing with is an agent from outer space, you know—!!

—there was no way he could endeavor to be a Special Correspondent for the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper if he was afraid of aliens.

He inhaled a shaky breath.

And undid the clasp.

He then stood the bag up and opened its cover flap. Peering inside, he found, stacked together, brand new textbooks and a dreary-looking spiral notebook on the right side of the bag. A cloth bag of sorts occupied the left side. When he tried to pull it out onto the table, he found that it was a cloth pouch with a handle containing something angular with lots of corners. It was too heavy to be a lunchbox.

Thinking that he should probably snoop around a bit more, Asaba then felt around the inside of the pocket-like compartment of the bag and took out a pass case.

He opened it.

In it were four mysterious looking cards.

One of the cards looked like a gate pass for entering the Sonohara Air Base. It was made of plastic so thick that he could not bend the card with his fingers. The card also had a magnetic strip, the kind that could be read by a machine. On it was a photo of Iriya. Beside the photo was a row of some numbers and code he didn’t understand, but he assumed those referred to her address in the Sonohara Air Base’s living quarters. He wondered why they left the ‘Name’ field

blank, though.

The remaining three cards looked identical to him.

They looked like telephone cards, from their round corners, lack of stiffness, and the punched hole on the right. Placing a telephone card he pulled out from his own wallet on top of the three cards, he found that they were of the exact same size and shape. The cards looked increasingly like telephone cards the more he looked at them, but there were no words nor patterns printed on them. Both the front and back of the cards were of only one color, gray, and the usual barcode, numbers indicating the number of times of use, and warning message 'Do Not Bend. Do Not Contaminate Do Not Bring Close to Magnets' were missing.

Only a small triangular sign was printed on one side. Asaba inferred that this side was the front of the card and the triangle indicated the direction of insertion should the card be pushed into a slot on a machine. He could figure out that much, at least. But, before wondering how the card was to be pushed into a slot, he needed to know whether these really were phone cards.

Asaba ignored the voice in his head, which was now practically screaming at him to stop, and stuffed one of the three cards into the pocket of his trousers.

A look up at the clock on the wall told him that two minutes have gone by.

He hurriedly returned the cards to the pass case and threw the case back into the bag's pocket. Telling himself that he will end his investigation once he was done looking through the contents of the cloth pouch, he placed his hands on it and opened it, once and for all. He had to fight the fear of not knowing what to do after finding sanitary pads in it.

The cloth pouch revealed three plastic vials of medicine, a portable game console, and three ROM cartridge cases.

The vials of medicine made Asaba feel strangely relieved. They seemed to assure him that the previous night's occurrences were not just a dream.

He popped out the lid of one of the vials and tried to pour its contents out onto his palms, finding that they were not sugar-coated tablets but compressed tablets. The pills were completely white and had no numbers nor words

impressed on them. The contents of the three vials appeared similar, but Asaba took three pills from each vial and wrapped them in tissue paper before putting them into his pocket.

The voice in his head had been reduced to a low, angry murmur. It's too late now. You're going to be wiped off the face of Earth.

Finally, he took the last item, the game console, into his hands.

It was a normal looking game console which he often saw around. It had an analog stick and four buttons below a colored LCD screen surrounded by laser projection points. This game console came in three types, all priced differently, and each type had a name so extravagant-sounding that Asaba would be embarrassed saying them out loud. The one that Iriya owned was the type that could aerially project three auxiliary holographic screens; in other words, it was the most expensive type.

When he flipped the game console over, he found that there was already a ROM cartridge in its slot. The ROM cartridge did not have a manufacturer name nor the usual colorful label on it. However, scrawled in black permanent ink on the cartridge were the numbers and letters:

"BARCAP—S03"

Maybe it's a pirated ROM cartridge, he thought.

As he expected, on the other ROM cartridges from the cartridge cases were similar codes:

"DCA—S08"

"DCA—S14"

"BARCAP—S06"

Three minutes had passed by a long time ago. That's enough, put it away quickly, return everything to where it originally was and get out of here, said the voice in his head, as insistent as ever. Yet, Asaba continued to stand there motionless with the game console in his hands.

He wondered what kind of games Iriya liked.

Someone must have given Iriya the mysterious cards and the large amount of



medicine. However, the game console was not something Iriya was 'made to carry' but something she 'chose to carry' with her. The choice must have been hers alone and not anyone else's, or so he thought.

Instead of investigating the cards and the medicine, he had a feeling that playing this game would bring him closer to Iriya.

Asaba placed a finger on the power button on the game console and was about to pr-

"What are you doing?"

At that very moment, the person who had been speaking to him all this while in his head blew off the top of his skull and ejected himself from his seat before running away.

Asaba thought he would die. He literally shrieked in surprise. This will spell the end of the Earth, he thought, and by sheer reflex, he turned back to look. In the process of turning back, he clumsily tripped over his own two feet and the game console slipped from his grasp.

The game console was expertly caught in mid-air by a right hand with a wristband around the wrist. No emotion flickered across her face. She didn't even blink, nor did she even glance at the game console as she caught it.

She had an English textbook and another dreary-looking spiral notebook tucked under an arm. She continued to look at Asaba, who was still glued in place, with no expression in her eyes. Once again, she asked:

"What are you doing?"

He would not be able to explain the situation away. Even if he were to try to come up with some excuse, it would be in vain. There was no way an agent from outer space would go easy on a human sniffing through her belongings.

In the very first place, why was Iriya here? Isn't class still on? Wasn't she supposed to be watching 'Little House on the Prairie' with subtitles switched off? There must have been some sort of contraption in her bag, some security device one could only see under a microscope that was made to trigger an alarm that was sent to her telepathically when someone opened her bag. Iriya must have heard that alarm and teleported herself here from the audio-visual

room to get rid of the troublesome human being who was trying to uncover her true identity.

By now, time in the audio-visual would have come to a momentary standstill. Everything would have been frozen in place, the drool dribbling from the corner of Hanamura's mouth, the movement of Nishikubo's eyes as he read novels under his desk, the flutter of the hem of Laura Ingalls's skirt as she ran through the forest as fast as she could to call for help for her father who had been injured by an exploding hunting gun.

"Step aside."

Iriya did not question him the third time.

When Asaba took half a staggering step back, Iriya wordlessly approached her table and started to put away all the things that have been taken out of her bag. She didn't hurry as she cleared her things, nor did she look angry. She seemed oblivious to Asaba's very existence.

"Erm,"

He thought he should at least say something.

"What about the fifth period? Did you skip it?"

Iriya had finished putting everything into her bag and was shutting the clasp on it.

"—where is this audio-visual room?" she asked, simply.

"Huh?"

Quietly, she pointed at the blackboard. He didn't need to turn back to look at the board to know that 'English class will be held in the audio-visual room' was written on it.

"If you had just followed everyone closely when they were going there..."

"When I came back, no one was here."

Asaba could not understand what she meant. He tried to piece together the fragments of what he already knew and what Iriya was saying, using guesswork and inference.

Kishimoto, the English teacher, was very particular about punctuality. Often, she would already be in the classroom before the bell had even rung. She usually had a lot of unpleasant things to say to students who come in late, so everyone in class would have left the classroom early to go to the audio-visual room. Iriya, who had left the classroom to walk around the school alone during lunch break, had returned to find the classroom empty, and that she had been left behind.

Perhaps something like that happened.

Asaba was beginning to feel annoyed. What unfriendly classmates he had.

On second thought, he might just be as unfriendly as all of them. When Iriya asked for his help when she was surrounded and accosted by Nakagomi and her friends with their machine guns, who was the one who left behind a single word, “washroom”, before making a fast break for the door?

Asaba’s thoughts were filled with excuses justifying his actions. It couldn’t be helped, he didn’t have the ability to avoid confrontation and settle things peacefully at that point in time. The dynamics of classroom control was, for better or for worse, characteristically bizarre and tricky to maneuver, and he was not good at it anyway.

Furthermore, it was inconceivable that Nakagomi had any ill intent. Technically, no one was ‘wrong’; it was simply unfortunate that Nakagomi and Iriya had crossed paths, that’s all.

Logically, he was right.

“—erm,”

Putting logic aside for now, he thought he should apologize to Iriya for abandoning her and running away, and of course, for opening her bag without her permission.

He should also let her know that everyone in class, including Nakagomi, were not bad people.

“Eh, about this morning...”

Something got in his way.

The public address speaker looking down at them from the corner of the classroom sputtered to life with a pop. The strong language in the lyrics of Sonohara Middle School's school song had caused much controversy within the Parent Teacher Association, and two bars of the melody of that school song played over the broadcasting system before a voice said,

"Ah—I would like to make an announcement. Iriya of Class 2-4,"

Some distance away from the microphone, the same voice could be heard asking,

"It's Iriya, right?"

The owner of that voice was the Head Teacher, Tashiro. Every time he made announcements, he would hold the microphone so close to his mouth that he was practically breathing into it. Asaba always felt he could almost catch a whiff of his bad breath through the speakers.

"Iriya Kana-san. Ah—Iriya Kana-san of Class 2-4, you have an urgent phone call from a Tanaka-san, so please make your way to the staff room. I repeat,"  
—phone call?

Asaba turned to look at Iriya with a face that asked *who's Tanaka-san?*

It was then he thought he saw a slight wavering in her facial expression.

The last vestiges of an emotion so intense that it broke through the thick barrier that she had placed around herself had inadvertently shown on her face.

If Asaba had turned to face her just a split second sooner, he probably would have been able to make out the true nature of that emotion. However, the hole in her defenses closed up almost as soon as it opened, and Iriya returned to her usual self.

Grabbing her shoes and looking at Asaba, she said:

"—I'm off."

With a flash of her skirt and her hair streaming behind her, she started to run.

Tashiro the Head Teacher breathed into the microphone for the last time and the melody of the school song finished playing. By the time the speakers fell

silent, there was no one but Asaba left in the classroom.

He could hear the cicadas warbling.

Asaba whiled away the rest of the fifth period in the library but punctiliously attended sixth period's Modern Japanese. Iriya did not return after being called to the staff room. The Modern Japanese teacher Ujiki explained that "she had to leave early due to certain circumstances".

Asaba only heard about Iriya's "go away" remark when it was time to clean the classroom. After he left the classroom, Iriya had said to Nakagomi and the girls surrounding her:

"Don't bother me. Go away."

"It was dreadful, you know," said Nishikubo with a groan, as he leaned on the blackboard he was wiping with a damp dust cloth.

"Nakagomi cried, and the three other girls were furious, too."

Hanamura sat on top of the teacher's table and skillfully balanced the broom handle vertically on the tip of his foot. With a grin on his face, he imitated the way the girls' spoke:

"They were like, 'there's no need to speak like that, right?!' or something like that."

Nishikubo nodded.

"There was this huge ruckus after that."

Hanamura continued with his mimicry of the girls.

"Like, 'what were you thinking? I don't believe this!'"

"But no matter what they said to her, Iriya was unfazed. I thought, wow, this girl must be quite ballsy despite how she looks, but when I looked her way, there was blood falling from one nostril in drips and drops," Nishikubo added.

"It was a nosebleed, you know? Blood coming out from the nose."

Asaba was hit by the memory of the smell of chlorine and red blood stains on a towel.

"Anyway, the girls who were kicking up a fuss withdrew like wharf roaches

upon Iriya's nosebleed 'attack', and Iriya made use of that opening to leave the classroom. She came back after the third-period bell with torn pieces of tissue sticking out of her nostrils."

Asaba tried to imagine Iriya with torn pieces of tissue up her nostrils, but it didn't go too well.

"And?"

Asaba urged Hanamura to continue with his story, and Hanamura snorted in laughter.

"What do you think? After that, everyone decided to let the sleeping dogs lie."

I guess that's to be expected, thought Asaba.

After all, she had said, "Don't bother me. Go away." While he knocked himself out in the infirmary, it was likely that Iriya had been left alone the entire day. Nakagomi and her clique of friends was the group that wielded the greatest influence over the class, and since 'the enemy's ally is an enemy', the other girls in class wouldn't have poked their noses in Iriya's business for fear of getting embroiled in the conflict.

Perhaps Iriya had found it difficult to stay in the class, which made her leave the classroom to aimlessly wander about the school during the lunch break. It wasn't difficult to imagine her being left behind for English as no one would have told her anything about class changing locations.

Asaba began to feel guilty.

If only he hadn't gone to the washroom. Even if he was unable to do anything to help Iriya at the point of time, perhaps things wouldn't have to end with Iriya saying something like "go away."

To make matters worse, he had opened her bag without permission to leaf through her belongings and was caught red-handed. He really wanted to apologize for that, though. He would have already done so if that baldy Tashiro hadn't called Iriya to the staff room.

"You three over there, stop loafing about and help me carry these desks!"

They finally got yelled at by Akiho. Nishikubo and Hanamura grudgingly returned to their cleaning under that fearsome glare of hers, but Asaba continued to stand there, lost in his thoughts.

And he was soundly thumped on the head by Akiho with her broom.

“Snap out of it! Hurry up and—”

Her expression immediately turned serious, and she asked:

“Are you okay? Feeling better? Don’t tell me you’re still feeling sick.”

“—huh? Did you say something?”

“In your own world as usual I see”, muttered Akiho with a small sigh, before going:

“Ah, right. Asaba, I’ll have to give club a miss today.”

“Why?”

“The Air Defense Committee called for a meeting, and I have to go to listen to them brief us for tomorrow, help out with the preparations, and whatnot.”

“—I see. The anti-air raid drill is tomorrow, isn’t it?”

Just like how members of the Library Club undertook routine tasks in the library, and how the members of the St John’s Brigade were tasked to bring students feeling unwell to the infirmary, members of the Air Defense Committee were to lead students and count their numbers during anti-air raid drills. Other than that, they usually had nothing much to do. This earned the committee the name ‘Free and Easy Committee’ and it was really popular with the students.

With a wry smile on her face, Akiho said:

“Nakamura-sensei was getting all pumped up for it, too. He was saying, ‘the theme for this round of anti-air raid drills is realism!’ or something like that. I have a feeling the briefing is going to end late so I’ll be going straight home after that. Tell Chief that for me, okay?”

“Okay.”

Asaba answered noncommittally and went back to his cleaning. Rearranging

the wiring in his brain to allocate ninety percent of its capacity on his thoughts and the remaining ten percent on controlling all movements below his neck, he continued to be preoccupied with thoughts of Iriya, as he randomly picked up desks, randomly moved his broom, and randomly threw away trash. Before he knew it, he had done more cleaning than he usually did.

Just like how oil and water did not mix, Suizenji Kunihiro and Sudou Akiho would squabble every time they saw each other. However, they had two things in common.

Firstly, they were both good at Rock-Paper-Scissors.

Secondly, they both ate a lot.

Suizenji ate as if he had a worm in his belly, and Akiho ate as if she was carrying a baby in hers.

Asaba was often teased for only eating a regular portion of rice without and not asking for seconds by the middle-aged ladies working at the diner Shimizu. Shimizu was right next to Sonohara Middle School and was basically the Journalism Club's second clubroom. It might be natural for someone who was male with large body like Suizenji to eat enormous amounts of food, but Asaba thought it was rather amazing for Akiho to be able to keep up with him. The size of their lunch boxes was mind-boggling and they would be eating something every now and then, even when they were in the clubroom.

Anyone who was looking on from the sidelines would wonder how they managed to not put on weight, but he thought it was a question of 'how vigorously they went about with their daily lives'.

As such, Suizenji came by the clubroom with food in his hands, as he usually did. He ate his way through bread rolls with red bean paste filling and pork cutlet sandwiches before washing everything down with juice that was a rather unhealthy-looking color.

"Iriya Kana?"

Suizenji thought only for a second before,

"Which porn actress is that? Was she from an indie porn flick?"



Who is he to say that when his name was also as flashy as a traditional Japanese ballad singer's, Asaba thought.

"On second thought, it's nothing."

Asaba looked away in a huff. It was a mistake to think he could discuss this with Chief to begin with.

Suizenji pulled out three more rice balls from a bag from the school co-op and started to munch heartily on one of them.

When he got to the second rice ball, he threw Asaba a sideward glance and said:

"Shupecial Correshpondench Afuaba."

"Harh?"

Suizenji's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, and when his mouth was finally empty:

"Special Correspondent Asaba."

"What is it?"

"When I open the door of my heart and strain my ears, I seem to hear from somewhere a sigh coming from a young man; one who wishes to speak his mind about whatever it is that he is brooding over. Or am I simply imagining things?"

"You're just imagining things."

"I see."

Suizenji quickly dismissed the matter. This time, he pulled out a cup of instant *yakisoba* from the same bag and proceeded to pour hot water from Akiho's personal electric kettle into it. Asaba watched Suizenji with an incredulous look on his face. At the same time, he started to drag around in his head the trail of thoughts he had been pondering over since coming from the classroom.

He wanted a chance to talk to Iriya.

First and foremost, he wanted to apologize. He also had plenty of things to ask her, and if she had been shunned by the rest of the class, he wanted to, at least, be someone she could talk to.

Nevertheless, he didn't like the idea of being ostracized alongside Iriya. Even if Akiho were to call him a big coward for thinking this way, it couldn't be helped for that was what he truly felt.

He racked his brains, trying to come up with a good excuse to talk to Iriya, one that would allow him to not offend his classmates when he tries to speak to Iriya in front of them.

“—you're eating a lot more than usual today, I see.”

Suizenji, who was pouring away the water he used to cook his *yakisoba* in out of the window, spun around and said:

“I was suddenly called out during lunch break, and I didn't have time to eat.”

“Called out? By who? A teacher, or the leader of a band of young thugs?”

“A girl, a freshman. She made me this really exquisite looking lunchbox and I ended up having to eat it with her.”

So you did manage to eat after all, Asaba muttered.

How rare, he thought. The ‘Suizenji Popularity Phenomenon’ that always occurred amongst the newly admitted girls in early spring would spontaneously die down by the mid of the first semester. That was because Suizenji's true disposition would be apparent by then. However, there were girls who have been dwelling on their admiration of Suizenji without consulting anyone, and continued to have the wrong idea of how he was actually like. Once in a while, one of them will do something terribly out-of-style and send him a love letter.

“So, how was it?”

“What can I say? There's no way I'd be full eating food neatly arranged in tiny portions.”

“No, as in, how did you feel talking to her, or...”

“Out of the question. She can't be my rival if the name Jesse Marcel didn't even ring a bell for her.”

Suizenji-san, why would you bring up something like the Roswell Incident when eating a lunchbox with a girl who put in great effort to make said lunchbox for you?

Asaba felt as calm and serene as a Buddha statue as he sent his heart out to that freshman girl whose name and face he didn't even know. He hoped that she would continue to live strongly, and once again thought about how useless it would be to discuss Iriya with Chief. Even if he would earnestly listen to what Asaba had to say, he would, at very best, say something like:

If you want to apologize, go apologize.

If you have something you want to ask her, then ask her.

If you want to be someone she could talk to, then be someone she could talk to. Don't bother about what others think of you.

He felt that Suizenji's suggestions would be very, very good suggestions indeed. However, if Asaba could do any of those things, he wouldn't be troubled in the first place.

Suizenji's hand, which had been reeling in noodles like a winch, stilled, as if he had suddenly recalled something.

"Oh, by the way, where is Special Correspondent Sudou?"

"—huh? Oh, Akiho said she'll be late coming from the Air Defense Committee meeting anyway so she'll be going home after that."

Suizenji clicked his tongue in annoyance.

"Right. The emergency evacuation drill is tomorrow."

"You mean the anti-air raid drill, right?"

"You idiot. How is that an anti-air raid drill? When the siren wails, everyone just becomes turtles hugging their heads on the floor in a row along the corridor. They then toddle along to the front of the air-raid shelter, stand in a row, and have their numbers counted. If anyone is able to survive an aerial bombing by going through such useless training then no one should worry about anything at all. No matter how favorable a light you cast on it, that sort of training won't even help you get through what that proverb says are the four things people fear the most in Japan; earthquakes, lightning, fires, and the traditional Japanese father."

Suizenji leaned back into his chair and tipped his chin up to face the ceiling.

“Seriously, she should just skip that briefing. I can’t split the work for the next issue if she isn’t here.”

“Speaking of the next issue, what are we going to do for our special feature? That little expedition we did turned up nothing, and we can’t very well write an article about us shutting ourselves away in the mountains...”

Mmmf, said Suizenji as he pursed his lips in thought.

“—Special Correspondent Asaba. Are you free on the coming Saturday?”

“Yeah, for now.”

The chair creaked as Suizenji leaned forward.

“Special Correspondent Asaba. How do you feel about taking turns to sneak into the restricted section of Sonohara Air Base with a camera in one hand, and taking as many pictures as we wanted of UFO wreckage or alien carcasses or whatever it is we find?”

Asaba flatly answered,

“I’m 100% sure we’ll get caught. You can go by yourself if you want.”

“If we manage to take pictures, it wouldn’t matter if we got caught or not, yes?”

“If they confiscate the films in our cameras it’ll be the same as not taking any at all, right? I’ll say this just in case you didn’t know. If we’re arrested on US Air Force territory, Japanese juvenile law would be of scant use. I’m sure they will clap handcuffs on us and throw us into an interrogation room where they’ll probably even search up our assholes, which you should be very familiar with.”

To elaborate on the asshole comment, when spiritual phenomena was all the rage last spring thanks to Suizenji, Asaba and Suizenji had snuck into the female toilet at a particular train station which was rumored to be haunted by ghosts in order to collect information for an article, which resulted in someone calling the police on them.

What was not written in the article on the May edition was that at that time, Asaba and Suizenji were dressed in female clothing. This was, of course, an idea that Suizenji came up with, and the cross-dressing was less for disguise than it

was for drawing out the ‘ghost’ who, according to the rumor, would wring the necks of girls who were prettier than she was from behind them if they entered the toilet. Even Asaba, who was wearing his younger sister’s school uniform, looked fairly strange, not to mention Suizenji, who stood at close to six feet. He was dressed in the image of a mother going out shopping, but he simply looked like he came straight out of a horror film.

They attracted the attention of someone in the vicinity who called the police, and when Asaba caught sight of the ensuing patrol car he panicked and ran for his life. Suizenji, however, refused to budge and even handed in his student pass to the police of his own accord while refusing to yield to requests that he leave, asserting that ‘he was a journalist in the midst of gathering information for an article’. He was promptly walked to the Sonohara police station and given a stern warning. The next day after lessons ended, he made a triumphant return to the clubroom and with an ostentatious smile upon his face, tossed to Asaba a roll of film he took out from his pocket.

“What?! Is that is the film from yesterday night?! How on earth did you manage to not let them confiscate this?! Where did you hide it?”

With a grin that seemed to say that he had scored one for journalism, Suizenji bellowed in a voice so loud that the clubroom shook:

“Up my asshole!”

In the end, the film was never used for that article. Akiho had flown into a rage and, donning cotton work gloves, had dumped the roll of film into the incinerator. However, even till now, Asaba felt sorry that the film was lost. Even if they were not able to publish the pictures, he had at the very least wanted to develop the film.

After all, they really might have managed to get pictures of... something.  
Or of someone not of this world.

“How very naïve you are, Special Correspondent Asaba. There are many ‘holes’ other the asshole that you could use,” said Suizenji with an unflinching smile. With the cup of *yakisoba* still in his hand, he continued, “For example, you could use your digital camera, laptop and mobile phone to send the pictures via an FTP client outside of Sonohara Air Base as soon as you take

them. As long as we delete the logs in the laptop, we would be able to keep the pictures we took even if they put us under arrest.”

“—in any case, we would still be put on the rack.”

“Special Correspondent Asaba. Do you not want to ascertain with your own eyes the true form of the Foo Fighters? Will you not roll in dirt and listen to the Miranda rights being read to you just once, for the sake of journalism? Ooh, that sounds so good, I’m shivering with excitement just thinking about it.”

What was so scary about Suizenji’s utterances is that you never know exactly how serious he is when he makes them. Asaba wondered if he should earnestly try to hold Suizenji back.

“Ah.”

He finally hit upon an idea.

“—right. We should simply ask Iriya for help.”

Suizenji gave him a questioning look.

“Special Correspondent Asaba. What is this about?”

“Erm, in other words, there was a transfer student who came to my class just today. Her name is Iriya Kana, her brother is some sort of military officer in Japanese Air Self-Defense Force, and she lives in the living quarters of the Sonohara Air Base. Well, we probably can’t ask for access to the restricted sections but if we could just ask her to allow us in to look around the inside of the air base for a bit, perhaps...”

“SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT ASABA!! WHY DID YOU NOT SPEAK OF THIS EARLIER!?”

Asaba rolled off his chair in fright. Suizenji stood and flung away the cup of *yakisoba* in his hand before running to the corkboard hanging on the wall and drawing a new column with the heading ‘Iriya’ on the ‘Good Job!’ Chart. In a flourish, he slapped on ten stickers in that column.

“Follow me, Special Correspondent Asaba!!”

“H-Harh?”

Suizenji dashed out of the clubroom and Asaba followed, without quite knowing what was going on. There was no way that Asaba could catch up with someone whose top speed was 100-meters in 11 seconds, and he soon lost sight of Suizenji. However, he could guess which direction Suizenji went by the cries of “Gya-” and “Wah-” that he left in his wake.

By the time Asaba reached Class 2-4, he was gasping for breath. The classroom was awash with sunset colors from the light coming from the windows. The few students who were still around looked taken aback at Suizenji’s sudden forced entry into their classroom.

Looking around, Suizenji asked:

“Special Correspondent Asaba, who is the student you speak of, the one that has come from outer space?”

Asaba did not breathe a word about Iriya coming from outer space, but that fact had already been established inside Suizenji’s head.

“I heard that I-Iriya had gone back early after an, er, announcement calling her to the staff room.”

“Special Correspondent Asaba. I trust that no other club has had its eye on this transfer student yet, yes?”

Asaba shook his head, while still desperately trying to catch his breath. He hadn’t confirmed it, but there was no reason as to why another club would scout Iriya, and he did not think that Iriya would have applied to a club on her own.

“Chief, don’t tell me you want to ask Iriya to...”

Without hesitation, Suizenji declared,

“Right-o. We shall take in that transfer student, and we cannot allow another club to outfox us. The Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper is in constant need of human talent.”

Asaba wondered what Suizenji intended to do if Iriya did not wish to join.

He also thought that if Iriya were to join the Journalism Club, he would have an excuse to speak to Iriya in front of his classmates without offending any of

them.

Yet again, if Iriya were to join the Journalism Club, perhaps some questions he had about his current state of affairs will be answered. No matter what sort of cauldron it was, as long as he threw Suizenji into the mix, it will bubble over theatrically in a chemical reaction that will produce some sort of conclusion, eventually.

Bathed in the light of the setting sun, Suizenji laughed, dauntlessly.

The first day of the second semester had finally come to an end.

Outside, the evening cicadas chirred.



Asaba didn't know who pranked him, nor what kind of prank it was supposed to be, but, the next day, he found a live cat in his shoe locker.

He had spent the entire night the day before single-mindedly copying over answers from the photocopy of the homework Akiho gave him, and once again a sleep-deprived Asaba arrived nearly late for school. The parking space for bicycles, which was far too small, was already overflowing with bicycles. Reluctantly, he chain-locked his bicycle to the bit of fence that was quite a distance away from the shelter of the roof. The evening sun shone mercilessly on that area after school hours, thus the seat of his bicycle would sometimes be too hot to sit on even when it was time for him to go home. However, there was no other place he could park his bicycle now.

Rushing into the school foyer, he placed his hands on the door of his shoe locker to get his indoor school shoes.

That was when his daily routine ended.

The moment he yanked open the door of his locker, a ginger tabby kitten flew out and clung onto his face. Asaba ate a lightning quick jab and a cross before promptly going down without a fight. The kitten yowled before disappearing out of the main entrance.

Asaba stepped in the classroom in great befuddlement, and when Akiho caught sight of him, she said, "What's that?" and pointed to his face. Only then did Asaba realize that he was bleeding rather badly from where the kitten had



scratched him.

“Look here.”

Asaba sat on his seat at an angle and timidly tipped his face upwards.

“Sheesh, I wonder who did this. What a horrid prank,” Akiho said as she puffed out in anger. With her usual violent fashion, she slapped the largest of the Band-Aids she always had ready in her bag onto Asaba’s nose.

“Imagine shutting it in such a narrow, confined space. Poor thing.”

Oh, so you were concerned about the kitten, Asaba thought to himself.

“I wonder if that kitten is the one I always see loitering around the bus stop. It was about three months old and had a little kink in its tail. Was it wearing a collar?”

“—I don’t think so, but I’m not sure. It all happened in a flash.”

Akiho returned her Band-Aid box to her bag as she said:

“There are two ginger tabbies in the area. The smaller one doesn’t have a collar and is probably a stray, and the larger one with a collar is Kojirō from Takizawa Stationery Store.”

Akiho often wrote articles like ‘I’m Giving Away a Stray Cat’, which was why she was extremely well-informed when it came to strays around the school.

“—I really don’t care which it was, though.”

Asaba gingerly felt the Band-Aid on his nose, lost in idle thought. He wondered who had put the cat in his shoe locker, and why.

It was then he felt someone’s gaze on him. Without thinking, he turned to see who it was, and Akiho also turned to look.

Iriya, who had been staring intently at them, promptly dropped her gaze.

“—what on earth was that for, I wonder,” Akiho muttered.

Feeling ill at ease, Asaba turned back to face the front of the classroom, but Akiho eyes remained fixed on Iriya. Lowering her voice, she continued,

“Hey Asaba, did you hear about her saying ‘go away’?”

Asaba nodded.

“Don’t you think it was awful? It’s natural that Maki-chan would dislike her.”

“—but,”

“She went too far. If it was a thoughtless remark she should have simply apologized for it, but she doesn’t seem to think she is wrong. I wonder who she thinks she is. At this rate, she’s definitely not going to be able to make any friends. What is with those wristbands of hers? Does she think it looks cool or something?”

Asaba looked up in surprise. He had never heard Sudou Akiho speak ill of others in that manner before. Akiho also had a look of surprise on her face at her own words. Noticing the look that Asaba was giving her, Akiho immediately rearranged her face into a smile and forcefully changed the topic.

“—erm, right. Asaba, did you and Chief wrap up any discussions yesterday? Like the allocation of work for the next issue, or...?”

It was Asaba’s turn to sit up with a start.

“Ah, no, we haven’t decided on anything like that yet, but...”

What Chief had decided on yesterday was something fairly outrageous.

“But what?”

“Erm.”

“What is it?”

Akiho seemed to not like Iriya very much, and this would be a bad time to tell her. Then again, she would eventually know anyway, and it might be less injurious for him if he coughed it out as soon as he could.

Asaba decided to tell her.

“Yesterday at the clubroom, I told Chief about Iriya, an unusual person that transferred into our class that day.”

Akiho remained silent, and her expression did not waver as she continued to look at Asaba.

“Chief was so happy to hear that she stayed in the living quarters in the

Sonohara Air Base. I mean, our efforts in the mountains during the summer holidays didn't yield anything fit for an article, right? He was also talking about his plans to sneak into the base to take photos, so before any other club takes her in, we should probably..."

Before he could finish, the worst person possible to appear at this time chose to show up.

He flung open the door of the classroom, and everyone in it looked up in surprise.

"Special Correspondent Iriya!"

Suizenji was standing at the door of their classroom.

There was a gleam in the silver rim of his fake glasses, and his hair was combed back in a pompadour that looked like the back of a very well-fed cockroach.

Unbelievably enough, he had a bouquet of sunflowers in one hand.

With long, swinging strides, he strode over to stand squarely in front of Iriya's desk, completely ignoring the attention he was getting before thrusting out the bouquet to Iriya with such vigor that some petals fell off.

"We, of the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper, are a small group of elite journalists who offer our readers expertise in a genre as expansive as the solar system and reporting as speedy as radio waves! These are dangerous times we live in, with imminent threat of open war and the world in disarray. Therefore, there is no day as important as today for journalism that aspires to bring to light the truths of this world! Join us, Iriya-kun, on our crusade to seek the Truth!!"

Iriya looked at Suizenji, and then at the bouquet he held out to her. Then, she held out both her hands and accepted the bouquet from Suizenji. She looked like she was, for the time being, simply trying to hold something that was thrust in her face.

Suizenji, however, interpreted her gesture as an expression of her intent to join the club.

"We welcome you!!"

He said in a ringing voice, before pivoting about his heels and giving Asaba an exuberant thumbs-up with his right hand.

It'll bring me nothing but trouble if you do that, Asaba thought.

"Well then, Special Correspondent Iriya, we shall meet again after school!"

Leaving behind those words, Suizenji laughed raucously as he slowly made his way out of the classroom.

Right after his departure, the classroom broke out in hushed whispers much like the ground rumbling during an earthquake.

I must say something, Asaba thought.

"—in other words, what I told Chief was that, well, since Iriya lives in Sonohara Air Base, with her help we might be able to take a look at the inside of the air base, and..."

Asaba choked on his next few words under the force of Akiho's withering glare. She then turned that glare on Iriya, before scowling at the door that Suizenji exited the classroom from.

"All of you are idiots," she muttered.

In the midst of all the whispering, Iriya sat not knowing what to do as she stared at the sunflowers in her bouquet.

## (Part 3)

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The morning had been a rather crazy one.

After surviving the first period, Asaba thought he should explain things to Iriya. He should tell her more about their club activities and their editor-in-chief's personality, and that he welcomed her if she would still like to join the club. If she didn't want to join—

He would try to persuade her to once more.

Asaba felt strangely resolute; perhaps Suizenji's audacity had influenced him somewhat. Standing up and turning around—

Iriya wasn't there.

The seat right at the back of the classroom, in the third row from the corridor, was empty. Only a bucket with the numbers '2-4' written on it sat beside her desk. A bouquet of sunflowers stood in it.

Asaba hurriedly scanned the classroom and very nearly missed the sight of Iriya's back as she was about to leave the classroom.

Where was she going?

Asaba chased after her and was able to catch up with her almost immediately, but he slowed his pace and put some distance between them as he slunk after her. He was nervous. How should he strike up a conversation with her, and how detailed an explanation should he give her? He was still dawdling over such thoughts when he reached the main entrance of the school building on the first floor. On that floor was a dusty shoe locker for visitors, some slippers scattered about messily on a worn-out duckboard, and a very old curtain drawn over the window at the reception counter. Beside the counter was a row of three public phones.

Iriya walked to the public phone on the right and removed a gray card from her purse.

Asaba's heart skipped a beat.

There was no doubt about it. It was that card, that mysterious card which looked and felt like a phone card.

Iriya unhooked the receiver of the phone and pushed the card through the slit on the telephone.

Asaba squinted, trying to make out the movements of Iriya's fingers.

#-0-6-2-4.

After keying in those numbers, Iriya pressed the receiver to her ear and waited in silence.

Perhaps no one answered her call, or perhaps she was listening to an information providing service, but she remained standing there for close to a minute. Not long after, she returned the receiver to its hook, pulled out the card that the telephone spat out, and turned around unexpectedly.

Their eyes met, and Iriya froze.

Struggling to put on an air of nonchalance, Asaba said:

“—you were on the phone, so it was hard to talk to you.”

Iriya maintained her stony silence. She didn't even blink.

“Err, you know, I'm really sorry about this morning. He gave you quite the shock, didn't he? That person who brought you flowers out of the blue is our editor-in-chief. I spoke to him about you yesterday, and he said he'd really like you to join our club. He does get some weird ideas sometimes, but he isn't a bad person.”

Silence.

“I'm, um, from the Journalism Club too. Do you know Sudou Akiho? She's in the club too. Right now, the club only has three members; Chief, Akiho, and me, but...”

Asaba stopped to inhale a breath, which he mixed and cooked with courage in the pit of his stomach before turning it into the words he wanted to say.

“—uh, if you were to join us, we'd have four people.”

Well of course.

Despite veering off point a little, to Asaba, it was the best thing he could come up with to convince Iriya to join.

Asaba had nothing left to say, so he cast his eyes down to look at his nails. The silence continued, and when he became unable to bear it...

“Eh, um, you don’t need to give us an answer right away. You could take your time to think about it, and...”

“I’m busy, so.”

Iriya said, abruptly.

As soon as she uttered those words, she turned on her heels and began to walk away. She didn’t give Asaba the time to say anything else and walked quickly, as though she wanted to shake Asaba off her trail.

I’m busy, so.

Her peculiar, clumsy voice echoed around in Asaba’s head.

He wondered what she had meant. Did she mean, “I’m busy right now, so I don’t have the time to listen to your detailed explanations”? Or did she mean, “I’m busy with a lot of things, so I don’t have the time to participate in club activities with you”?

No matter what she had meant, he thought he had already done what he could.

Asaba felt exhausted from being on the edge for so long. Thinking that he should head back to the classroom, he was just about to shuffle forward when...

—the gray card.

Asaba stopped in his tracks. He scanned his surroundings. No one was around.

This part of the school saw little human traffic as it was a good distance from the classrooms, with the school’s hustle and bustle nothing more than a distant echo in the hallway. With bated breath, Asaba stood in front of the same public telephone Iriya had used earlier and unhooked the receiver.

He took out the gray card he swiped from Iriya’s bag the previous day from his wallet. Listening carefully to the receiver, he slid the card into the slot.

At first, he heard nothing but white noise, but a familiar dial tone soon followed.

Slowly, he punched the buttons:

#-0-6-2-4.

The telephone line connected elsewhere without as much as a ringtone.

On the other end of the phone, a synthesized female voice began to speak.

“This is the Advanced J-STARS Data Link. A request for a Picture Call has been made from Terminal S-S-8-9-0-1-1-3. The time now is 1-0-0-4. AWACS is now out-on-campaign. AWACS is, Navaho 02, Shield 01, Shield 02, Gorkii 05, the aforementioned four, planes. I will now report their statuses. Navaho 02, Picture Clear. Shield 01, Picture Clear. Shield 02, Picture Clear. Gorkii 05, Picture Clear. I repeat, Navaho 02, Picture Clear. Shield 01...”

From somewhere very close by, the cicadas were warbling.

Asaba slammed the receiver back on its hook. Snatching up the card that emerged from the slot, he ran, away from the telephone.

He wanted to be somewhere without cicadas, where there were people.

Running up to the second floor, he weaved through the crowd of people coming and going along the corridor and finally managed to calm down a little. He drank and drank from the water fountain on the corridor until he felt like throwing up, and then wiped his mouth with a forearm.

It was then he realized.

**#0624.**

The twenty-fourth of June was International UFO Day.



Plan Number 26.

He would wait till lunch break. He would go for the moment right after the bell for the end of the fourth period, when the class would be disorderly and everyone would only be thinking about lunch and their empty stomachs.



He would casually stand up and casually walk up to the front of the desk right at the back of the classroom in the third row from the corridor.

There, he would say:

—Iriya. Could I have a minute? I have something important to tell you.

He would then casually lead Iriya out of the classroom while maintaining a careful distance from her as she followed him through the corridor, up the staircase, and into the clock tower's engine room, where no one would see them. He would not take no for an answer. He would, in one fluid motion, push her down and—

No, the script. He would have to stick to the script.

—I want to apologize for opening your bag without your permission yesterday.

It'll be good if he could come up with some random excuse, and it'll be great if he could produce a sufficiently remorseful expression on his face. Finally, he will inch his hands towards his pocket and say:

—I'm sorry I didn't return this to you. I didn't know what this was and took it only because I was curious.

He would pull the gray card out of his pocket and return it to Iriya.

Alrighty.

This plan might work.

Asaba somehow made it through the second, third, and then the fourth period. Finally, it was lunch break. The ravenous hunger which was swirling about the classroom was released into the air all at once. At Nakagomi's command, the entire class stood and bowed. About half the class sat back down and took out their lunchboxes while the other half made a fast break for the school canteen.

When he was poking about the contents of Iriya's bag the day before, the voice in his head had said:

—don't you know by now that you're already in so deep that you're up to your neck in a canal?

That voice was spot-on.

On the other side of the thin veneer of his ordinary life was something big, something monstrous that, unbeknownst to anyone, had been brewing insidiously under the surface, like a fetus stirring in a womb. He had not 'seen' it up to now, and even if he were to 'see' it, his brain will tell him that he did not. However, Asaba had finally started to notice its presence, after almost losing his footing at a very important juncture.

At the very least, he should return what he took from Iriya's bag. He did not know if things would cool off after that, but he knew he must do something.

Before it was too late.

Asaba took a breath, amidst the hubbub of voices in the class during the lunch break.

—plan No. 26, Action.

He casually stood up.

"Yo Asaba, I see you're without a lunchbox today."

It was Nishikubo.

"—nope."

From the second period till now, he had taken great pains to scrabble together whatever little courage he had, and he couldn't turn back now. Tripping over the legs of tables that were lined up haphazardly along the walkway, he walked straight to Iriya's desk as he dug his hands into his pocket, his fingers tracing the edge of the gray card. Iriya had her hand on her pouch's handle and was about to get up from her seat, but she sensed Asaba approaching her and stiffened.

"Iriya. Could I have a minute?"

Plan No. 27. He would pick a time when Iriya was not in class to throw the gray card in the compartment under her desk.

It was too late for that.

"—uh. I have something important to tell you."

Nishikubo and Hanamura chose that very moment to lean forward on their seats and prick up their ears to listen to what Asaba had to say to Iriya. Akiho's hands, which were about to open the lid of a massive lunchbox, stilled; she must be watching them closely from the corner of her eye.

The air of relaxation which accompanied lunch breaks must have drifted into the staff room as well; Kawaguchi Taizou, single and thirty-five years of age, was leaning the back of his head on the backrest of his chair, the delivery menu in one hand as he weighed his options: rice topped with a pork cutlet or chilled *soba*. In the infirmary, Shiina Mayumi had a finger on the button of the hot water dispenser as she filled her cup of instant *udon* with hot water. In the canteen, the usual scuffle for the odd bread roll or rice ball had broken out and Suizenji, with his coin purse in between in teeth, was kicking away rivals standing in his way.

It was a snapshot of the school at a typical lunch break.

All at once, from the speakers all the over the school, a siren blared at full blast.

The Level One air raid siren.

Everyone jumped out of their skins.

It's the war, they thought.

The war had finally begun.

When the Level Three siren sounded, the students were to quickly file into the corridors and there they would have to wait, curled up on the floor, for further instructions. In Sonohara Middle School, the teachers were obliged to lead the students to safety. There are five teachers in the school who have undergone training by the Japanese Self Defense Force and have been certified 'Third Level' in 'Emergency Preparedness'. The official arrangement was to have these teachers supervise the students and lead them to the air raid shelter in times of emergencies.

All those plans were as useful as snot on one's sleeve.

In the face of a siren which announced the end of the world, no one, not the students nor those foolish teachers, could move a finger. It was as if a gaping

abyss suddenly opened up in their everyday lives and no one knew how deep it was.

—the anti-air raid drill was today.

Asaba wondered who first remembered that.

This is a drill, right? The drill was today, right? The students began to whisper amongst themselves, and the whispering gradually increased in volume, spreading across the whole school like a message relay game. All who heard the murmurings rubbed their chests in relief and, in order to hide their embarrassment, said to each other in righteous indignation, I knew it, it was a drill after all, it's impossible that there would be a war. Then again, why raise a false alarm like that? Don't they usually announce the commencement of the drill before playing the siren? But oh, the look on your face was priceless just now, you had your mouth wi-de open and your eyes looked like they were going to pop out of your skull—

The siren continued to wail.

Someone shouted across the corridor, “Oi! They’re saying it’s a drill!”, and the tense atmosphere in Class 2-4 slowly started to loosen up.

Asaba let out a relieved sigh.

He recalled what Akiho had said.

“Nakamura-sensei was getting all pumped up for it, too. He was saying, ‘the theme for this round of anti-air raid drills is realism!’ or something like that.”

That would explain the airing of the Level One siren without pre-empt.

Even so, Asaba thought that Nakamura had overdone it. Usually, an announcement would be made to tell everyone that an exercise was to take place, followed by the siren. This was the first time the siren had been activated without an announcement.

The siren continued to wail.

However, the unprecedented drill made it clear as day that there were problems with the conventional drill. Asaba thought that the drill this time round was effective in that sense.

Even though it was firmly established that all were to immediately go out into the corridors and curl up like turtles once they heard the siren, in reality, when push came to shove, no one was able to move even a finger. Only when they realized it was a drill did they calm down and finally start to file into the corridors while acting like it was a huge bother to do so.

At this point of time, Nakamura would probably be in the broadcasting room with a grin on his face that said “Ha ha! Gotcha!”. Wrapped in such thoughts, Asaba inadvertently turned back to look at Iriya, thereupon—

Asaba witnessed a look of sheer terror upon her features.

Iriya was usually expressionless, but on her face was pure, undiluted horror. She looked paralyzed in fear as she shrank into her chair, staring upwards at the siren-blaring speakers like cornered prey. Impulsively, she tried to rise from her chair but tripped over the leg of desk and fell flat on her face.

Her fearful eyes met Asaba’s, who had hurried over to help her onto her feet.

The siren continued to wail.

—maybe Iriya had mistaken the exercise for a real air-raid.

“It’s okay, because—” Asaba yelled, in order to make himself heard above the siren.

This is just a drill.

That was what he was about to say, but just before he could get those words out, he saw the fear in Iriya’s eyes turn into resolve.

Iriya sprung up, closed her fingers around Asaba’s hand in a vice-like grip, and started to run, pulling Asaba along with her. She ran, past the surprised looks of everyone watching them, out of the classroom and down the corridor.

“W-What’s wrong?! Wait—”

He couldn’t say anything more, and Iriya had no ears for him anyway. She continued to run with all her might at a speed that even Asaba struggled to keep up with, dragging him along behind her. At the Air Defense Committee members’ commands, students were starting to stream out of the classrooms in groups, forming sluggish lines against the wall in the corridors. They also

dawdled along as they curled up in a turtle-like position on the floor.

There was a pictorial description of this defensive ‘blast-proof’ stance on page sixty-three of their student handbook, under the chapter ‘In Case of Emergencies’. It was supposed to help you withstand the impact of a bomb blast and to survive an outbreak of war.

The siren continued to wail.

Iriya, who was running past them along the corridor, stopped abruptly in her tracks right in the middle of a line of crouching students. She looked around at the throng of turtles as if she couldn’t believe her own eyes.

Then, she yelled at them, in a voice that sounded like she was squeezing whatever hope she could from a heart that was already filled with despair.

What are all of you doing?

What’s the use of doing that?

Pick yourselves up and run behind me if you do not wish to die!

However, no one heeded her words. A turtle right next to her raised its face, startled by her shouting, but looked up at her as if it didn’t know why she was making such a big fuss.

What a strange sight it was.

Rows of turtles snaked along the traditionally messy corridor, and, in the shadow of each stack of corrugated cardboard boxes and every cleaning equipment locker, there’d be a few turtles huddled together, shoulders touching.

It was a sight Asaba had never once beheld.

That was because he himself had always been curled up on the floor the entire time. This was his first time looking down from his full height at the students performing the anti-air raid drill.

That was why he could tell, at just a glance.

Those students probably made an unconscious decision to hide amongst the cardboard boxes and lockers. Even if he were to grill them about it afterward,

they might simply deny doing it on purpose. Perhaps somewhere deep in their hearts was the notion that those cardboard boxes and lockers would serve as protection against the nuclear warheads raining down on them from the sky above.

Right at the end of the corridor stood Kawaguchi Taizou, single and thirty-five years of age.

“What are you two doing, get to the wall and roll up in a ball on the floor at once!” he roared, waving his hands about in the air.

To Asaba, Kawaguchi at that point of time seemed very much like a low-ranking warden ordering his turtle slaves about.

Asaba thought to himself.

—why don’t *you* curl up like a turtle too?

When the siren first started sounding, he could bet that Kawaguchi was frozen in place, just like everybody else. Only when he realized it was a drill was he able to lord over them and raise his voice at them in such a pompous manner. But, was he confident of being able to do the same when a real siren sounded? Or would he throw his responsibilities out the window, run as fast as his legs can carry him, and crouch in the shadow of the cardboard boxes and lockers after pushing away the students in it to make space for himself? In the first place, didn’t he feel like there was something strange about the scene along the corridor right now? Had he ever thought, just for a second, that there was something wrong with the exercise, despite looking down at the students from such a great height every time a drill was carried out? There was no way he would take orders from Kawaguchi now.

The siren continued to wail.

Iriya didn’t stand around for very long. Tugging on Asaba’s hand, she started running again, almost jumping down the steps as she rushed firstly down the stairs, then along the corridor leading to the gymnasium and out into the school grounds. They were still wearing their indoor shoes, and Asaba could hardly breathe as he moved his legs as fast as he could to keep up with Iriya without falling over.

In no time at all, they had reached the armored door of the air raid shelter.

The shelter's armored door was large enough to easily accommodate two large military vehicles going in and out side-by-side. The wall itself looked extremely thick and was covered with enameled signs advertising for a health tonic or a pesticide, among other things.

Finally able to stop running, Asaba sank down onto the floor, gasping for breath.

Students were not allowed to actually go into the air raid shelter, not even during drills. They only lined up in front of the shelter to have their numbers counted, after which the drill would end. He also once heard that the Sonohara Air Base had direct control over access to anti-air raid shelter. Thus, Asaba had never seen the inside of the shelter before.

However, Iriya slid a gray card into the slit on the door that shouldn't have been able to open. Almost without a moment's delay, the lock clicked and the armored door began to swing open slowly, revealing its full cross section. Asaba found himself so fascinated by how thick the wall actually was that his eyes followed the movement of the door.

Once again, Iriya grabbed onto his hand, and Asaba crept into the shelter after her.

The air raid shelter was as large as the inside of the school gymnasium and looked cleaner than he thought it would be. On the floor were a row of hatch doors and many different lines of various colors, much like the corridor of a hospital. The revolving lights that were installed all over the place bathed the room in yellow light, and from a speaker somewhere a recording of a female voice played on repeat:

"The root code is in utilization. All locks are currently de-activated. The root code is in utilization. All locks are currently de-activated."

Then, a shockwave ripped through the air, and Asaba's insides shook in its wake. It was as if someone had dropped a very large boulder.

Asaba looked behind him in alarm and found that the armored door, which was previously two meters open, was now firmly shut. Iriya was operating some



sort of panel beside the gate and a few moments later from the speakers:

“The root code has been modified. Encrypted sealing of the shelter is complete. All outside communication is blocked. Air circulation is in complete isolation mode. The root code has been modified.”

In surprise, Asaba asked, “Y-You locked us in?”

Iriya did not deign to reply as she tapped on several keys on the panel. Like a submarine missile silo, the hatches opened one after another and shipping containers rose up from below the hatches.

“—uh.”

Asaba finally found his tongue again.

“You know that the siren just now was for an anti-air raid exercise, right? We do it once every month. Didn’t you have them at your previous school?”

For a brief moment, Iriya looked like she didn’t believe him, but that expression vanished as soon as it appeared. She hurried over to one of the shipping containers and tapped the gray card on the decoder which caused the lid popped open.

“Hey, listen. You might not know this since you have only just recently transferred here, but it was decided many days in advance that the drill would be today. Usually, though...”

Usually, an announcement along the lines of “We will be commencing the drill now” will be made before the siren is switched on.

However, the siren was played without an announcement just now.

A tiny hole opened in the pit of Asaba’s stomach.

—the anti-air raid drill was today. So what? That was no guarantee that the siren just now wasn’t real.

What nonsense, he decided. He was overthinking it. The war will never break out, and that broadcasting of the siren without an announcement just now was simply Nakamura enacting some weird plan he had concocted in the capacity of an Air Defense Committee member.

—what if that very same Nakamura had actually lost all color in his face and was pissing himself in the broadcasting room right now? If the Level One siren had played via the direct communication line without him pressing the button, he would be the first person to realize how dire the situation was, after all.

No, that can't be.

It was decided many days in advance that the drill would be today. Everyone would go out to the corridors and turn into turtles and then form lines in front of the anti-air raid shelter and get their numbers counted...

—then do you think that the enemy would be considerate enough to think, oh, since Sonohara Middle School is carrying out an anti-air raid drill today, we shouldn't confuse those people, and we should probably drop bombs on them tomorrow instead? Asaba, don't avert your eyes from reality. The siren played. The usual broadcast that assured everyone that it was going to be a drill did not play. That is the truth.

No, Asaba. This drill was special this time round. Akiho said that Nakamura was enthusiastically saying that “the theme for this round of anti-air raid drills is realism!” didn't she? That's why...

—that's why, what? Say it.

The tiny hole in the pit of Asaba's stomach was growing larger and larger by the second, and everything ordinary about his life was slowly but surely draining away, disappearing out of that hole, leaving behind black, inky nothingness.

—what's with that expression of yours? It seems like you still don't understand. Since Nakamura said ‘the theme for this round of anti-air raid drills is realism’, let me explain to you what ‘real’ means. It's this reality you're grappling with right now. This is the ‘real’ air raid that everyone has been anticipating. Oi, what's wrong? Did you think that you should at least be able to hear the blasts outside from inside the shelter if war had begun? If you thought that this air-raid shelter was that primitive, how would it be able to withstand an attack from the skies in this current generation? Ah well. They say ignorance is bliss, after all. I guess I shouldn't say anything more, since it's all up to you anyway. It's show-time for you; the start of a performance with your life on the

line. Everyone was taking it easy, thinking that they would never have to experience war. Yet, they may have become bored with their ordinary lives and secretly hoped for a real war to begin.

Someone prodded his shoulder.

When he looked up, Iriya was standing right in front of him.

“Hold this.”

The moment he laid his eyes on what Iriya held out to him, Asaba’s intestines knotted up. It had been completely re-engineered into a shape that was slightly unusual, but Asaba knew what it was at a glance.

It was an automatic rifle.

Asaba limbs went numb, and he was unable to move his fingers.

“Just in case. They might come inside.”

Iriya already had a rifle slung over one shoulder. Looking pointedly at each of the small boxes that lay at her feet, she carefully explained:

“This one contains spare ammunition. This Level Four bio-hazard safe packaging contains Botulinum neurotoxin bullets. The bullets may not work on them but don’t use them until I give the green light. Protective gear is in the one over there...”

“—you’re joking, right?” Asaba whispered hoarsely.

“This is only a drill, right? Everybody is perfectly safe outside and laughing at us now, I think. After all, there will never be a war.”

While still holding out the rifle, Iriya eyes turned upwards to look intently at Asaba.

“The war began in 1947,” she said. “It’s just that no one noticed.”

Everyone might have already been reduced to ashes by now. Outside, beyond that armored door might lay a world that he no longer recognized, a world devoured by the raging fires foretold by the Buddhist teachings. The school building and the rest of town reduced to a pile of rubble, and everyone he knew, along with everyone he didn’t know, burnt beyond recognition, till you

couldn't even tell if they were male or female.

Asaba reached out weakly to take the rifle that was proffered to him, and just as his shaky fingers were about to close around the—

A telephone rang.

Asaba cried out in shock, and Iriya dropped the rifle that she was holding out to him. Seized with panic, Asaba looked around him wildly and realized, for the first time, that there was a telephone on the wall to his right. A red lamp above the telephone flashed in tandem with the ringing of the telephone. Since Iriya could only stare wide-eyed at the flashing light, Asaba was left with no choice but to pick up the cordless receiver.

“—hello?”

He had half expected to hear something like “Surrender!” in broken Japanese, but not only could the person on the other end of the line speak perfect Japanese, he could also tell what Asaba's name was just by hearing his voice.

“Oh! Asaba?! It's me it's me. Enomoto.”

Enomoto?

He had no recollection of such a name. Or did he?

The person on the other end of line seemed to be in a rather noisy place, and the cacophony of voices in the background made Asaba think that they were carrying out a rather difficult operation. Someone in the background could be heard shouting, “Nami-san made contact! Woah, as one would expect of Nami-san! Yeah yeah I got it I'll treat you, I'll treat you to whatever it is you wanna eat!”

“Oi hello, Asaba? Can you hear me? We kind of forced our way through an emergency communication line to connect to the phone you are using, so do say something if you can hear me.”

Without thinking, Asaba said:

“—um, Who do you wish to speak to?”

“Hm? Oi, what's this about, didn't we meet at the pool at night the day before yesterday? Did I not tell you what my name was?”

You didn't.

Asaba recalled everything, all at once. The man who suddenly appeared at the pool at night, who told him of the story of the querulous old janitor, the mysterious man who called himself 'something like Iriya's elder brother' with droopy eyes and a face that looked like someone who would crack ribald jokes and laugh uproariously at them himself. He could almost picture in his head the huge grin on that man's face.

"Ohhh ya know, we were literally at our wit's end. We were caught by surprise when control of the system's root over at where you're at was suddenly taken over by someone else. Then Shiina Mayumi called and told us that Iriya had mistaken the anti-air raid drill siren for a Level One siren and had dragged you into the shelter against your will. You okay? Your cherry not popped yet?"

Asaba felt all his strength leaving his body. He was so overcome with relief that his vision started to dim. It was a drill after all. There was no war. Akiho, Nishikubo, Hanamura, and Chief were safe.

"Sorry for the trouble we caused you. You see, Iriya lived her entire life on a military base. No military personnel would play something that sounds as disturbing as a Level One siren even during drills, ya know. Well, I guess we can't really blame her for getting all worked up after hearing it."

"—s-so,"

Asaba's mouth wasn't working properly.

"So, it really was just a drill?"

"You bet. The world out there is perfectly fine. Everybody over here are like cats on hot bricks though."

"Where exactly is 'over here'? Where are you?"

"At the Sonohara Command Centre. Ohhh man, we tried all sorts of ways to open the shelter but it seems like that Iriya had modified the system's root to encrypt its lockdown. I'm sorry but you'll have stay inside for a while longer. Not that I think you'll mind, though. There's food, booze, and cigarettes in there... Will you pass the phone to Iriya?"

Swiveling around to find Iriya standing right behind him, Asaba said:

“—like I said, it was a drill.”

Iriya wordlessly took the receiver that Asaba held out to her. She then spent the next three minutes on the phone repeatedly saying yes, yes in a small voice in response to what sounded like one-way instructions to Asaba, who was right next to her. After the conversation ended, Iriya quietly returned the receiver to its hook.

She then collapsed into a heap on the floor.

Asaba thought she was so relieved that she lost the strength to stand.

“—but you know, it was great news, right? That war didn’t happen for real. I mean, just now, I really thought that...”

Iriya’s shoulders were heaving slightly.

She was crying.

Asaba was momentarily stunned. He did not know why Iriya was crying, nor did he know what he should say to her. Not knowing what to do, he circled her awkwardly.

“U-Uh, Iriya? Um, are you okay?”

Iriya started to break into quiet sobs, loud enough for Asaba to hear. Tears fell on her skirt and with each teardrop, Asaba became even more flustered, wondering what he should do. But, he couldn’t think of anything at all. He reached out a hand to pat her back, thinking that she would find it comforting, but his hand stopped when he saw the automatic rifle on her shoulder.

Softly, in between sobs, Iriya said:

“I wish the air-raid was real.”

“I wish everyone was dead, and we had lost the war.”

Asaba opened his mouth a couple of times, but no words came out of it. Only time passed.

He did not know what was going on, and he doubted she would give an explanation to him even if he asked.

But as he looked at Iriya in her middle school uniform with the sling of a rifle cutting into her shoulder as she cried and muttered things like ‘I wish everyone was dead’, he thought he should not carelessly say things like “It’ll be okay!”, or “Cheer up!” to a girl like that.

Completely at a loss, Asaba stood there stiffly as Iriya hugged her knees to her chest. Only time passed.

**Note:** This is where the previous translator halozy left off.

Asaba worried for Iriya, who was still crying with her knees to her chest, but he also had a feeling that things would get awkward if he stuck too close to her. So, he decided to tour the inside of the air raid shelter.

In the room were three other large doors. They looked rather similar to the armored door at the entrance of the shelter in terms of how they were constructed. They didn’t look like they could be pushed open or shut by hand.

If one were to think about it, this shelter was Sonohara City’s fourth one. In event of an emergency, this was not only a place of refuge for all students of the Sonohara Middle School, but also for all residents in the vicinity. This probably meant that behind those doors were large rooms like the one Asaba was currently in, with sufficient space to house large groups of people for an extended period of time.

There were a total of twenty-six hatches cut out on the floor. The eight hatches that Iriya had opened remained open, with the shipping containers still sticking out of the hatch from somewhere below the floor.

Asaba deduced that those shipping containers were actually cargo trailers. Lying below the floor was some sort of construct with rails running in all three directions. Asaba believed it to be some logistics system that acted on instructions from a panel to send containers full of goods from a central storage area to the nearest hatch door at a specified destination.

The shipping container that Iriya had opened with her gray card was fully loaded with, firstly, automatic rifles, but also other small firearms.

Asaba tried pulling different items from that box. He didn’t know an awful lot about guns, but he had always thought that all guns were like .44 Magnums,

made entirely out of metal, shockingly heavy, and would snap off the wrist of an unpracticed user should he to try to pull the trigger.

But, to his eyes, the ‘real’ guns that lined the container looked exactly like toys. They were far lighter than he thought they would be, and were made of a material similar to plastic. Just above the grip were the words *a-ta-re*, which could be read as a prayer to hit one’s target. Asaba thought that there should be a limit to how much frivolity one should apply to things like that.

Yet, these were definitely real guns.

Just like how a nail-clipper is a nail-clipper, and a coffee mug is a coffee mug, what he was holding in his hands now was, beyond a doubt, a real gun.

Asaba playfully cocked the gun at his hip and made ‘bang bang bang’ sounds while gunning down imaginary enemies to his left and right.

Iriya was standing right in the line of fire.

Deeply mortified, Asaba stammered:

“E-Erm. Someone wrote the words *a-ta-re* on these guns. Do you think it is some sort of good luck chant?”

Iriya simply said:

“Maybe.”

Asaba was trying to hide his embarrassment, and Iriya played along with his attempt. However, his embarrassment must have shown on his face as Iriya sounded a tiny bit harried as she continued:

“That word indicates your section. The *a* in *a-ta-re* stands for *anzen* (safety), the *ta* for *tansha* (injection), and *re* for *rensha* (rapid-fire).”

Asaba was tickled by the fact that Iriya sounded a little flustered. His lips twitched into a smile, and he looked away so she would not see it. When he finally killed the urge to break into a foppish grin, he turned back to Iriya and found her trying to say something and pointing timidly at his nose.

“—is there something on my nose?”

When he felt his nose, there really was something hanging from it. The Band-



Aid that Akiho had given him had peeled off halfway. As he pressed on the hanging end of the Band-Aid with his fingers trying to paste it back on his nose, Iriya said to him, in a voice that sounded like a mosquito's whine:

"Do you like cats?"

For a brief moment, Asaba wondered what she was talking about, and—  
—ah!

"W-Was it you, Iriya?! Were you the one who put that cat in my shoe locker?!"

Something unbelievable happened. Iriya suddenly flushed beet red and shook her head vigorously from side to side. She then turned her back on Asaba.

"Eh, erm, it's okay even if you did. It's not like I was angry about it..."

Iriya, still refusing to look at him, cried out loudly:

"I did not!"

She probably meant to deny it by saying "I did not put that cat in your locker" but she was far too inept at feigning ignorance for anyone to believe her. Iriya was the culprit, no matter how he looked at it.

But, why would she—

Asaba thought briefly before asking:

"—Iriya, do you like cats?"

Iriya was still not looking at him, but after a short silence, she said:

"I touched one for the first time today."

Asaba was slightly taken aback.

"You've never touched a cat before? Not even once?"

Iriya nodded.

"—so, how did the cat feel?"

Iriya slowly turned around to face Asaba.

"It was warm."

She was looking at Asaba with upturned eyes.

“Do you, Asaba, dislike cats?”

“—nope, I like them.”

Iriya lit up with a tiny smile on her face.

With the way things were going, perhaps he could get answers to some questions he had for her, Asaba thought. It was then he noticed an item that was thrown down onto the floor next to the telephone.

“Is that yours, Iriya?”

Iriya looked at where Asaba was pointing, making a small sound of surprise.

It was Iriya’s cloth pouch, the one with the handle.

Come to think of it—

Right before the siren started playing, Iriya was about to get up from her seat while holding on to her pouch. She seemed to have been holding on to it the entire time, from when she was having a panic attack after hearing the Level One siren to when she was running to the shelter, and yet neither of them noticed.

Asaba chuckled in amusement. In *manga*, he had read about people running away from fires in the middle of the night, still in their pajamas and holding on to kettles and pillows. That portrayal was not entirely inaccurate after all.

“—right. There was a game console in that pouch, wasn’t there?”

Asaba decided to take another brave step forward.

“Would you let me play it?”

Iriya looked slightly troubled by his suggestion, but she nodded her consent. Asaba ran over to where the pouch lay and proceeded to take out the game console in it. Flipping it over, he found that the ROM cartridge in its slot had the words “BARCAP—S06” written on it.

Iriya had seated herself behind him, so close that she was almost plastered on his back.

“Put on the earphones. You can’t play it if you can’t hear the sounds from it.”

Asaba heeded her words and pulled out the earphones from a reel inside the console. He then jammed the ear buds into his ears.

“What kind of game is this? What does BARCAP mean?”

“It’s the name of a mission. Barrier Combat Air Patrol.”

Asaba didn’t really understand what she said but decided to press the power button anyway. The LCD screen lit up, and the three laser projection points around the screen also started up.

However, nothing else happened.

There was nothing on the title screen. The LCD screen remained blank and the holographic screens the laser projection points projected were light green, but also blank.

“Press the start button.”

Iriya was leaning herself over his right shoulder to look and whispering into his ear.

He could feel her breath on his ear, and he was more than ninety-nine percent sure that pressing on his back over *there* and right about *there* were Iriya’s boobs. He could feel his heart beating faster.

He obliged, and some images along with some words appeared on all four screens. Asaba thought it looked like a flight simulation game.

The holographic screen right in front of him probably showed him the view above the plane. Asaba knew that at least, from the movies he had seen. However, that was all he could comprehend. He had absolutely no idea what the data on the LCD screen and its flanking holographic screens meant. He was also beginning to hear strange sounds coming from his earphones. It sounded like a number of pipe organs playing different chords at the same time.

Iriya pointed at the images on the LCD screen the auxiliary holographic screens in turn as she said,

“HUD, MFD, MFD, DED. ADI, VVI, HSI.”

Then, she pointed at various points of the image marked ‘HUD’ as she explained, “Altitude relative to sea level, air velocity, compass gauge reading,

AOA indicator, Flight Path Marker, tadpole, funnel, crosshair...”

Those words sounded like incantations for spells. However, he could at least understand words like ‘altitude’, ‘velocity’, and ‘crosshair’.

“In other words, all I need to do is aim the crosshair at the enemy and shoot, right?”

He thought he got that part right, but he could feel Iriya shaking her head against his back.

“This is in EEGS mode now, and this curve over here is the funnel. This is the record of the Manta’s mechanized surface. You put the enemy inside this.”

Asaba still didn’t understand.

“—so, the first thing I should do is...?”

“Contact AWACS. You switch channels from Sonohara TACAN vector 027 to TALOS 01 and make a Picture Call.”

“—ah,”

“The C-button.”

Asaba pressed it anyway. The LCD screen then displayed some sort of image he couldn’t comprehend.

“What is this?”

“Updated information from the JTIDS giving you the altitude and distance from the bearings of a designated location. Bulls-eye heading 020, 40 nautical miles away and 12,000 feet above us are three hostile objects, and one unidentifiable object which would probably be a Seed. The current bulls-eye is Sonohara.”

“—eh,”

“If you press the B-button you can send a command to the element. Have the Missile Carriers and Dummies go out ahead of you and accelerate to around 700 knots in aircraft heading 020. Once you break 30 nautical miles, a Predator spike will come at you so you would have to do a Chainsaw with seven Missile Carriers. Then you tuck your head in and do a Fox.”

Asaba couldn't understand a single word, but he decided to try playing the game for the time being while following Iriya's instructions.

## (Part 4)

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To sum up everything he did understand:

‘Manta’ or ‘Black Manta’, a word that appeared frequently in Iriya’s explanations, was the name of the fighter jet he was supposed to be on. ‘Missile Carrier’ and ‘Dummy’ were unmanned friendly drones under the control of ‘Manta’ while ‘Predator’ and ‘Seed’ referred to the enemy. The boss character of the game was the ‘Seed’, and the main mission was to corner the ‘Seed’ with your drones and do a ‘Fox’, which was to fire your missiles at it and bring it down.

When playing BARCAP—S06, you assumed the role of a Black Manta pilot. Together with a fleet of fourteen Dummies and twenty-seven Missile Carriers, you would fly in a ‘Para Bellum’ formation while patrolling a designated airspace at an altitude of 12,000 feet for 60 minutes. An altitude of 12,000 feet didn’t strike home for Asaba, but Iriya, using a long string of difficult sounding words, explained that one could no longer maintain control of machines via aerodynamic means at this extremely high altitude right in the middle of the stratosphere.

According to Iriya, this game was meant to be a stoic game. Thus, fast forwarding was not allowed in that 60 minutes. Within this time period, enemies could appear several times, or they may not appear at all. In either case, the player just needed to patrol the skies. When an enemy is spotted, the player had to disperse into an offensive formation, lock on to the enemy target on TWS radar mode, follow the T-D box with the missile reticle, and then close in onto the enemy until the caret is in the DLZ bracket...

Asaba couldn’t really follow her explanation after that.

“Right, right, right! Break right! No, the other way! Not there, the other way! We should be really close by now, so—there, there, there! B-button, B-button, B-button, B-button, B-button! Left! Break left! Get the T-D box into the reticle and do a Fox! Put it in! Quickly, quickly it’ll get away it’ll get away it’ll get away! No, no it’s too close now! Put it in put it in! Ah, ahhh!”

Perhaps he got lucky, or perhaps one would call him really unlucky, but he stumbled upon three groups of Predators with Seeds at their cores within just a few minutes of starting the game. Asaba couldn't understand Iriya most of the time due to her frequent use of abbreviations. By the time he finally realized that Iriya was saying "We are too ill-equipped to have any chance of winning; let's abandon mission and retreat!" amidst his confusion, it was too late.

However, Asaba's head was spinning, not so much due to the fact that Asaba had lost all his Dummies and twenty-two of his Missile Carriers, but because Iriya was leaning on him so hard that she was almost hugging him from behind, communicating her full body weight and warmth.

Perhaps making up her mind to ensure Asaba made it back from the mission alive, Iriya pressed herself even more determinedly on him as she shouted at a volume so loud that no one would expect of her normal self:

"The Predators are spiking you! Break left! Once you hear the Trace Alert, drop the flare while escaping with a Beam Maneuver! Break away! Run away! Run away, run away, run away, run away! Ah! Ah, ahhh, ahhh!"

Iriya was pressing so hard on him that he could feel the firmness of her bra against his back. She was so close that her cheek was pressing against his. Furthermore, her titillating shouts of "Put it in put it in" and "Ah, ah, ah!" rendered Asaba in no shape to do anything, not even play the game. His eyes were no longer looking at any display screen, his fingers not pressing any buttons. He was torn between the desire to feel her breath on his ear and wanting to squirm away from the sensation of her breasts against his back, and just as he was being driven to the verge of a fainting spell—

All movements on the screens froze, abruptly.

"—eh?"

Perhaps he was picked off by the enemy. He wasn't sure, but that was what he thought.

Suddenly, Iriya's head lolled forward as her body went lax against Asaba's, till he was nearly supporting her entire weight. Her lips were pressed firmly against the nape of his neck like she was kissing it. Asaba wondered what she was trying to do.

He could no longer differentiate his raging heartbeat from Iriya's; she was so close that their hearts seemed to beat in tandem.

He wondered what was wrong with her.

He wondered what he should do.

He thought about kissing her.

Right after that thought crossed his mind, he felt her heart pound once with such force that it felt like her heart was being hurled against his back. Asaba jumped up in surprise.

—what was that, just now?

“Iriya?”

Asaba shifted instinctively, causing the precarious balance that Iriya had achieved as she rested her weight on Asaba's shoulders to be lost as she slipped off his right shoulder. There was a loud thud as her head hit the floor. There she lay on her side, in a pool of her own hair. There was a fair bit of blood flowing from her nose, the whites of her eyes were showing, and her limbs convulsed slightly.

“Iriya?! Hey, what's wrong?! Are you okay?! Can you hear me?!”

With a labored sound, Iriya drew in a breath mingled with blood, like she was trying to respond to him calling her name. When he turned her to face upwards and tried holding her hands, she gripped them weakly in return, but he suspected it was nothing but a semi-conscious reflex.

Asaba pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket and tried his best to wipe the blood away from under her nose. He cursed himself for not being able to think of anything else he could do for her, but remained at a loss. Why would she suddenly just—

He remembered.

The telephone.

Shaking off Iriya's hand, Asaba scrambled towards the telephone and snatched up the receiver. His heart dropped when he realized he did not know which number to call. But, then again, when he took a closer look at the phone,



he found neither a dial nor buttons—

“—hello, is this Iriya?”

Enomoto answered the phone, after a sudden and very brief dial tone.

“Erm, Enomoto-san?! Hello?! She is bleeding, she is bleeding from the nose, I mean, when we were playing that game Iriya suddenly collapsed and now she can’t move and her hand and legs are shivering too! Hello?!”

Asaba knew that he wasn’t making any sense, but he couldn’t help it. There was no way he could convey his current predicament to Enomoto in this manner. He was so frustrated that he wanted to die.

However, Enomoto said, evenly:

“Calm down, Asaba. Calm down and answer me. Is Iriya having a nosebleed?”

“After getting a nosebleed, Iriya suddenly fell over, she was perfectly fine before but then she just suddenly keeled over!”

“So she got a nosebleed and then she collapsed. Is she conscious?”

“I-I don’t know, I don’t know if she is!”

“Relax. Okay? Pinch the insides of her thighs as hard as you can and see if she reacts.”

Asaba backtracked to where Iriya was lying with the receiver still in his hand. Forgetting himself in his panic, he stuffed a hand up her skirt and pinched her thighs.

Iriya did not respond.

She did not cry out, nor did she even twitch.

“She didn’t move! She didn’t move! What should I do?”

Enomoto did not answer him immediately, and Asaba felt like an eternity had passed as the few seconds ticked by.

“Asaba, listen to me. You didn’t do anything wrong. Iriya didn’t become like that because of something you did or did not do. I think I know the reason for her collapse, it is a hundred percent our problem, and you need not feel responsible for anything.”

“I don’t care about who’s responsible! What should I do now?”

“Right after you guys locked yourselves in there, Sonohara and Mikage Second Section launched an attack on the encryption on the lock. It looks like it’ll give if we pushed on just a little more, but we might be too late. We can only count on you now. Okay? First, look through Iriya’s pockets. You should find a plain, blank telephone card. It’s gray on both sides, and—

Asaba had one of those cards on him. He took it out of his wallet in a flash, and:

“I found it!”

“Awesome. Next, look to your right while facing the telephone. You should see a container with ‘C—02” on it. Can you see it?”

Asaba ran about frantically with the cordless receiver in his grip as he went through the shipping containers one by one. When he got to the fourth one...

“C—02!! I found it!”

“Great. Take that telephone card, and when you see the decoder next to its lid...”

Asaba swiped the card on the decoder, and the door of the container automatically—

“It opened!”

Cold, heavy smoke poured out of the shipping container, and—

“In it you should find a large number of cases as large as first aid kits, frozen and thinly separated from each other with dividers. Confirm this. Is it like I said?”

It was as he said.

“Look through the cases and find one with a label that says ‘P—3KI’.”

Asaba felt disheartened as he ran his eyes through the cases. There were close to a hundred cases packed in that container, and they all looked identical.

“Which is it? I don’t know which one it is!”

“Find it! We put it in sometime in July so it should be somewhere right in

front of you!”

Asaba dove into the shipping container and started to pull out the cases, one after the other, from the divider frames. The air from the container was so frigid he was finding it difficult to breathe, and the dangerously cold metal cases clung icily onto to his skin. However, Asaba didn’t have the time to care about things like that now.

Just as he felt that he could no longer bear the uneasiness of not knowing if the case he was looking for was in the pile he was digging through or in another shipping container...

“I found it! I found it I found it I found it I found it I found it!”

He yelled into the receiver, his breath coming out in puffs of white clouds.

“Pull the power from that case and bring it to where Iriya is.”

Asaba shook the case from side to side and managed to yank its power cable from its socket. He then rolled out of the shipping container and crawled back to where Iriya lay.

“What now?”

“Look below the lid, and...”

He opened the case. When he peered inside, he immediately understood what he had to do and nearly passed out there and then.

In the case were two stainless steel syringes as large as batons used in relay sprints.

“—I-I can’t do this, this is impossible!”

He heard Enomoto’s sharp intake of breath on the other end of the line.

“Inject that into her heart.”

Asaba’s vision turned pitch black.

“Look here, it isn’t that difficult. That syringe was designed such that anyone could use in on Iriya in her current state. The syringe will automatically discharge the medicine pneumatically and the needle is the exact length it needs to be to reach her heart. You just need to jab it down as hard as you can.

On the contrary, it'll be worse for her if you held back. The place you have to inject is marked on Iriya's chest. Pull up her shirt, undo her brassiere and confirm that there is one."

"B-But, her chest!"

Enomoto finally lost his shit and raised his voice at him.

"You aren't someone who will shit his pants after seeing a classmate's breasts, are you? Who on earth was it who was still getting into a bathtub with his younger sister till Elementary Six?!"

Asaba yelled back at him:

"How do you know something like that?"

He dashed tears from his eyes.

Of all people, why him? Why was he the one to meet with such misfortune?

Through his tears, he looked at Iriya lying motionless on the floor. There was no color in her face, and there were streaks of caked blood under her nose from his haphazard attempts to wipe her blood away. The whites of her eyes were still showing slightly, and a single tear trickled down her cheek from her right eye.

Those eyes had pleaded to Asaba for help.

When Iriya did not know what to do when Nakagomi and her friends approached her, she had appealed to Asaba for help. She had tried to depend on him, like how she had clung to him with all her might when she was drowning in the pool.

Despite all that, he had run away from her, to the washroom.

However, he had no place to run to now.

No one would come to save him; he had to manage this on his own.

Asaba straddled Iriya's slim hips. Beneath him lay a person with the feel and warmth of a real girl. In order to buoy his sinking courage, he was deliberately rough with his actions. He pulled up her shirt to her jaw in one swift motion, and almost wrenched her bra off her chest.

The twin peaks of her bosom lay bare and defenseless.

He took a deep breath.

Near the middle of the chest, just about where he would think her heart would be, was a tattoo of her blood type and an inverted triangle enclosed by a circle.

He spoke into the receiver, “—here I go.”

And the receiver answered him, “—we’ll be counting on you.”

Asaba then threw the receiver aside, being acutely aware of an encroaching whiteness, not of emptiness, but of white-hot flames, that was slowly blotting out everything else in his head.

He raised the syringe.

Beads of sweat broke out all over him.

*On the contrary, it’ll be worse for her if you held back.*

In a single breath, he would push the needle of the syringe straight into—

Once again, a familiar shockwave ripped through the air, as if someone had dropped a very large boulder, and Asaba’s insides shook in its wake.

It was the sound of someone operating the armored door.

Those extremely thick doors were swinging outwards slowly, and Asaba could hear Enomoto hollering something at him from the receiver that he had cast aside. Sunlight shone through the widening gap in the armored door and the harsh, sultry summer air rushed in, rustling past Asaba’s hair. Voices clamored in the foreground; someone could be heard asking about the alarm, and someone shouted something about poisonous gases. Someone else yelled that it was dangerous so everyone should get back to the classrooms. Gradually, the cacophony of voices in the background increased in volume, as the door continued to open.

Then the din suddenly fell dead silent, like someone had thrown a bucket of water over the crowd of people.

Bit by bit, Asaba turned to face the crowd.

Parked outside the shelter were several white vans and military vehicles. There were Chemical Defense Squad members clad in protective suits and soldiers in their field uniforms everywhere, along with a large crowd of students. Those in protective suits dashed into the shelter once the door was open, only to stop in their tracks, their eyes rounding in surprise behind the eyepieces of their masks. Everyone, without exception; the soldiers in field uniforms who were trying to push back curious onlookers, and those onlookers who would not be held back, all stood there with their jaws hanging, wearing a face they would have worn if they had been told to zip up an open fly.

Asaba could have sworn that even a compass would have, at that very moment, turned around to point its needle at where the newly transferred student Iriya Kana now lay on her back, topless, with none other than Asaba Naoyuki, Class 2-4, seat number one, straddled on top of her.

It was all over for him.



His memories of what happened next were a little scrambled.

“Excuse me, excuse me!” said Mayumi Shiina as she pushed past the crowd of bystanders. She then grabbed at the syringe that Asaba was still stiffly holding aloft and stuck it into Iriya’s chest like it was nothing to her; it was as if she was merely chopping vegetables on a chopping board.

And after that was done, Mayumi Shiina brought her mouth close to Asaba’s ear and whispered something in it.

—if you promise me that you’ll keep it to yourself, I’ll negotiate with the US Air Force and get a Silver Star Medal<sup>1</sup> for you.

Or, he could have misheard her.

Nevertheless, Asaba did remember, albeit hazily, her telling him something along those lines.

Rumors about what happened right in front of the armored door of the air-raid shelter reached the classroom before Asaba did.

He had virtually no memories of how he returned to the classroom after the

incident.

His ordinary life outside the shelter had not been burnt by nuclear fire, nor had the world been invaded by aliens. After lunch break was fifth period, and after the fifth period was the sixth.

He also had virtually no memories of the contents of those lessons.

Iriya spent the fifth period in the infirmary but was somehow diligent enough to return to the classroom by the time sixth period was about to start. She took her seat without saying anything or even looking at Asaba, and looked so much like her ordinary, expressionless self that it was almost disappointing. It made her nosebleed and convulsions just moments before seem like a dream.

However, to everyone else except Asaba, her lack of expression took on another meaning: the careful lack of expression of a girl who was pushed down onto her back and nearly violated.

The sixth period ended, classroom cleaning time ended, and:

“Akiho, Chief said he will split the work for the next issue today, so—“

Akiho turned to face him, her hand coming up above him from the side. She then slapped him across the face with the force that Asaba would have applied to a foot-bellow. Her eyes shot to the flaming red maple leaf-shaped mark her hand left on his cheek, and her sideward gaze lingered on that mark even as she swiftly turned on her heels and left the classroom.

Asaba was left in a daze with his hand against his cheek.

An arm came up to sling itself over his shoulders.

Hanamura said, “Aren’t you looking good, Asaba-kun!”

“Mannn, this is the first time I’ve seen a boy being hit by a girl up close!” said Nishikubo.

Asaba finally came to his senses and looked at the door which Akiho exited the classroom from like he was looking at something far, far away in the distant sky.

“Nishikubo—“

He thought he shouldn't show himself at the clubroom today.

“—treat me to some ramen.”

Nishikubo nodded, gravely.

After packing up, the three of them left the classroom. Along the way to the school foyer, they met several people whose faces perked up with an “Ah!” as they passed Asaba by.

“You’ve become quite the celebrity now, haven’t you?” laughed Hanamura.

Asaba wondered if he really did become one.

If he were to defend himself for his actions, his explanation would eventually have to touch on the incident at the pool. He would then have no choice but to admit that he did not quite know what was going on, from the beginning till end.

“Well,” began Nishikubo, as he pulled out a pair of sneakers with well-worn heels from his shoe locker and threw them down on the floor, “There may people who talk trash about you, but I’m on your side.”

Since that incident at the pool, Asaba felt like he had lost his footing somewhere and slipped out of reality. That was because ever since then, he had not been able to fully understand everything that had happened to him; instead, he had felt uneasy, and at times, fearful. However, after somehow surviving the curious looks and whispered banter all around him, he finally came to a realization.

The biggest reason as to why he waded in so deep was because, somewhere inside his heart, he was unwilling to let go of the ‘mutual secret’ he shared with Iriya.

“And! As someone on your side, I have a question for you.”

“What?”

Nishikubo sucked in a breath and turned to face Asaba with a solemn expression.

“—did you do her?”



Must he go there?

Asaba thought the best weapon to use to spearhead himself out of the situation was a wry smile, but upon seeing it, Hanamura suddenly started wriggling around like a spoilt child.

“Tell us!!”

“W-What are you getting all worked up for?” said Asaba with a dry laugh, but his smile had a hint of bitterness along the edges. It was less frustrating to be pressed for answers like this than to have people whispering behind his back. Even more so, when the truth about what happened was, well, something like *that*.

“Some things are better left unsaid,” Asaba declared grandly before opening his shoe locker.

And closed it.

“Washroom,” he said.

Both Nishikubo and Hanamura went, “Huh?”

Asaba decided to put on a show. Rounding his back and hugging his stomach, he creased his brow in a manner he hoped was not too over the top.

“My stomach doesn’t feel good. Sorry, could you all go ahead without me? We’ll do ramen some other time, okay?” Asaba said in a rush of words, as he stuffed his feet back in his indoor shoes which he had been in the midst of removing.

Leaving Nishikubo and Hanamura with astonished looks on their faces behind him, he half-ran, half-jogged as he left the foyer, acting like he was in a great hurry.

After that, Asaba really did go to the washroom.

He had already told Nishikubo and Hanamura to leave without him, and as both of them were rather impatient people, Asaba did not think they would wait for him at the foyer to finish his business in the washroom. But, to be doubly sure, he decided to sit on the toilet bowl with his pants and briefs neatly pulled down in a cubicle to kill time for a while.

He sat there with his bare ass sticking out for thirty minutes.

After which he pulled up pants which he did not actually need to pull down, flushed the toilet which did not actually need flushing, and washed his hands, which did not actually need washing. He then left the washroom and headed back to the foyer. Before he knew it, he was walking on tiptoes, and his heart raced faster with each step. He passed by the entrance to the foyer once without stopping in order to verify, with a sideward glance, that Hanamura and Nishikubo were not around.

Alright.

He stopped, did an about-turn, and went back to the entrance to the foyer. Placing his hands on the door of his shoe locker, he took a deep breath and opened it.

He wasn't mistaken, after all.

Resting against his 25 cm sneakers which he hadn't washed in a while, was a pink and extremely inappropriate-looking envelope.

This had never happened to him before. Not once, ever since he was born.

Asaba snatched the envelope up and turned it over. The words on the bottom right-hand corner seemed to jump out at him as he read them.

“Iriya Kana”

Pull yourself together and keep your cool, Asaba told himself.

Many things happened between him and Iriya today, and that troubling incident at the air-raid shelter was the very last straw. Currently, they were both subjects of rumors flying about the school.

In other words, this might be a prank, and the culprit could be someone like... Nishikubo or Hanamura.

Asaba looked about him restlessly. Perhaps Nishikubo and Hanamura were stealing glances at him from the shadows, muffling their laughter.

Perhaps the letter in the envelope would read: “Today will be a day I will never forget. Naoyuki came on so strong, after all. Kana was so surprised when Naoyuki suddenly forced himself on her. But it's okay, really. Please wait in

front of the main gate of the Sonohara Air Base at 3 PM next Sunday. This time, Kana will be the one giving Naoyuki an experience he won't forget," or something like that.

Then, they might lay in wait for him on Sunday just to catch him all dressed to the nines like a stallion raring to go, only to wait in vain, before laughing at him once more.

However, Nishikubo and Hanamura were with him throughout the fifth period, the break after that, the sixth period, and even during classroom cleaning time. He didn't think they would have had the chance to leave something like this in his shoe locker. That is to say, this was someone else's doing, and possible suspects include everyone in his class and every student who was looking on from the front of the armored door. That would be more than a hundred people, and this would mean he would have to subject every one of those hundred people to torture inside his head.

Hang on, he thought. He seemed to remember seeing this pink envelope before. The same kind of envelope was being sold at the school co-op. Since the school co-op only carried a very studious-looking and unexciting line-up of goods at the stationery corner, a pink envelope like this stuck out like a sore thumb. Rumor was that the teachers were considerate enough to get the co-op to sell it just in case there were students who want to use it for love letters, thus this pink envelope was rather famous amongst the students. He wondered if there was any female student in this school who would actually use this envelope to contain their love letters.

No, hang on, he thought. Iriya only transferred to this school just yesterday. She must have had no idea how most students view this pink envelope. If she were to, without preconceived notions, choose an envelope for a love letter from the line-up of items at stationery corner, it was highly likely that she would have arrived at this pink one.

No, no, hang on, he thought. That sounded weird. "If Iriya were to pick an envelope for a love letter from the school co-op, she would pick this one"? That might be true, but so what? Even if he were to make that assumption, the probability of this letter being a prank would not be reduced in the slightest. The problem lay in the fact that the pink envelope was something being sold at

the school co-op, and also that it looked like it was prepared hastily in the wake of that incident at the air-raid shelter. One could say that the ‘prepared hastily’ part was pretty suspicious.

No, no, no, hang on again, Asaba thought. What if he put himself in the prankster’s shoes? Let’s say he was the one wanted to play this prank. What would he have done? If he had to procure an envelope for a prank by buying it from the school co-op, would he have, out of all the ones he could have bought, chosen *this* one?

The prankster must have known about this pink envelope since it was a rather famous one. A letter in a shoe locker, by virtue of it being in a shoe locker, would be more than sufficient to make the victim think it was a love letter. Since a drab envelope would more or less do the job, wouldn’t the prankster, in order to not arouse unnecessary suspicion, choose a more docile looking envelope? If Asaba were to execute the prank, that was what he would have done. Right now, he was already having serious misgivings about this envelope. If he had to buy an envelope from the school co-op, he would have avoided buying this one at all costs.

All that is left now was, “If Iriya were to pick an envelope for a love letter from the school co-op, she would pick this one”.

Anybody who saw him now would think he was frightened out of his wits.

Asaba stood there, face slick with grease and sweat, as motionless as a scarecrow with the pink envelope in his hand, fervently crawling around in the quagmire of his own thoughts. He did not think Iriya was the sort who would write a love letter, but then again, he had a feeling that she seemed like a girl who had enough crazy in her to do something like this.

If it were a real love letter from her, Asaba would have absolutely no problem with it. In fact, he would be over the moon. Not only that, he would be so happy that he will consider today to be the day he kissed his days of being a boy goodbye.

But, what if it turned out to be a prank instead?

If he had agonized over it this much and still fell for the trick by opening the letter, it would feel like an ignominious ‘defeat’. Finding it difficult to move, he

held the letter up to his face and scrutinized every corner of the envelope, hoping to find some sort of clue. He wished he had X-ray vision. If only he had been more serious about the training they did last winter when the Suizenji topic was still ‘Telekinesis’, which would purportedly help them develop extra-sensory perception. If he had, there was a chance that he might, by now, be able to sneak a peek at the words written on the—

Words.

Asaba flipped the envelope over once more and eagerly studied the words on the bottom right-hand corner of the envelope.

Seared into his eyeballs was the sight of Iriya appearing in his classroom for the first time, her name written neatly on the blackboard behind her. He felt that the words “Iriya Kana” on the blackboard then looked awfully similar to the “Iriya Kana” on the envelope now.

Let’s bet on that, he decided. Let’s bet on that memory, and trust that this was, without a doubt, a letter from Iriya.

Asaba, finally liberated from the quagmire of his thoughts, abruptly became aware that people may be looking at him, and he stuffed the envelope down his collar into his shirt.

He shall open this envelope, and read its contents.

In a place without people.

In a place with cicadas.

Taking a deep breath, Asaba suddenly broke into a run. He ran out of the foyer entrance onto the school grounds in his indoor shoes, taking the long way around the back of the row of club rooms before entering the gymnasium via the toilet window, slipping through the darkness of the tool storage area under the stage, and exiting the gymnasium from the west-facing emergency exit. He then proceeded to scramble up the drain pipe onto the bumpy, uneven roof of the walkway corridor. There was a basketball nestled in one of the bumps on the roof, forgotten, and Asaba kicked it off the roof as hard as he could. Running along the walkway roof, he re-entered the school building through a window on the second floor and dashed in a straight line towards the end of the

corridor. Along the way, he bumped into Vice Principal Tashiro who had just emerged from the staff room, and after receiving a scolding: “Don’t run in the corridors!” he continued up the stairs.

He was extremely short of breath by the time he was halfway up the stairs, but gritted his teeth and forced himself to continue climbing anyway.

Only to finally reach the engine room of the clock tower.

Anyone who looked at the timeworn dial on the clock tower from the outside would think that it looked grand, but they might be surprised to find that the inside of the tower was actually rather narrow and untidy. The walls in the engine room were covered in graffiti, and scattered about the floor were the cigarette butts smoked all the way till the end by someone who probably couldn’t really afford them. There was only one south-facing window with patches of dust and dead insect carcasses clinging to the glass. Despite that, some sunlight still managed to pierce through it, tinging the darkness of the engine room with a yellowish hue. Gears and speed regulators in the room turned lazily on their axles, their sharp, knobby corners reminding Asaba of a skeleton.

It was warm.

Asaba bent over with his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath. Sweat dripped from his chin, disappearing into the fibers of the wood as soon as they touched the gritty wooden floor. He righted himself and crossed the room to open the window. There was a written rule that said no one should be allowed to open this window, and in the past, it was always kept locked. However, no matter how many times they fastened a new padlock on this window, someone would break it.

He stepped over the windowsill and came out under the summer sky, onto the roof of the school building, before seating himself on the roof tiles, ignoring the dried pigeon droppings and the heat searing his backside as he sat down.

The south-facing part of the roof on the clock tower sloped steeply downwards, extending out for about three meters before dropping off into nothingness.

However, the view of the countryside surrounding the school was stunning.

This was the reason why they persisted in putting a lock on this window, and also why someone would break it each time.

Asaba pulled out the pink envelope, now crumpled and covered in sweat, from inside his shirt.

A long, thin sigh escaped his lips.

The pit of his stomach felt cold. Perhaps it was where he was at right now, he thought. One wrong step and he could fall to his death.

He then opened the envelope.

In it was only one slip of paper.

The first thing he saw, jumping off the page at him, were the words “Iriya Kana”. For some reason, she had written her name in a box. Above this box were three words, fuzzy and indistinct from being photocopied again and again, over multiple generations:

Club.

Application.

Form.

With a soft thud, Asaba fell sideways onto the roof, all alone. The sun-charred roof tiles were scorching hot, but right now, he didn't care. The thought which he had abandoned in the quagmire he escaped just moments before resurfaced in his mind once more, like a zombie emerging from a swamp.

Iriya didn't seem like the sort who would write a love letter.

Then again, she seemed like a girl who had enough crazy in her to do something like this.

“... What a strange girl...”

It was not long before he was unable to bear the heat of the roof tiles against his cheek. Asaba rolled over to lie on his back.

He closed his eyes, but could still feel the sunlight piercing through his eyelids, so he shielded them with a pair of very sun-burnt arms. And there he remained, stretched out on the roof, on his back.



If only Asaba, now currently brain-dead, had looked over the form again, and read all the way to the end.

Right now, the letter Asaba had in his hands seemed like a flimsy, insignificant photocopied form, but it was, without question, a club application form; a formal document which expressed the wishes of a girl known in this school by the name of “Iriya Kana” to join a club.

However, the Journalism Club was a guerrilla group not formally accepted by the school. Since the school treated the club as how they would treat a simple group of friends, one didn’t need a club application form or anything like that to join such a group. Asaba and Suizenji didn’t explain that part to her clearly, and Iriya had probably gone to a teacher and asked him or her something like, “What should I do if I wanted to join a club?” In response, the teacher would have given her this form and she had filled it up with the necessary information.

How much straighter than an arrow could she be?

On that form was, as Asaba had seen, a heading that said “Club Application Form”.

Below the heading was a line for writing one’s name and the club one wanted to join, and Iriya had written, in neat letters, “Iriya Kana” and “Journalism Club” respectively.

Below those lines were two boxes, one for an advisor and the other for a teacher-in-charge to affix their seals. The first box for ‘Advisor’ was empty, which was to be expected for a guerrilla group that did not have one, but, for some reason, the ‘Teacher-in-charge’ box had a seal that said “Shiina”.

The name of the mastermind who had been pulling strings.

Finally, right at the bottom was a large column called ‘Reason for Wanting to Join’. Only an institution like a school would make students write things that no one would earnestly read. The majority of the student body would write tired old clichés in a column like this. Like ‘I want to train my body and my mind’, or something like ‘I want to use this opportunity to develop richness of spirit’. The point is, you could write anything you wanted to, and a jaded teacher will most



likely still put his or her seal on the form for you whether this column was filled in or not.

One could almost see her in their minds now, that woman in the infirmary who had willfully put her seal on the form, standing behind Iriya and leaning forward to peek over Iriya's shoulder. She would have grinned when she saw that the tip of Iriya's pen had stilled at the "Reason for Wanting to Join" column on the form.

—no, you can't leave that blank, you have to write what you really think.

Anyone would be dead sure; one would have bet anything one had. Shiina Mayumi must have whispered that into her ear.

How long then, do you think Iriya took to write down her answer for a simple question like "Reason for Wanting to Join"? She might have hemmed and hawed for a long time, or she might have, against all expectations, written down her answer without much hesitation after being told to be honest about what she wrote.

This isn't the time to be lying on his back on the roof like this, Asaba.

After all, in the "Reason for Wanting Join" column on the form that Asaba was holding on to, Iriya had written only one sentence:

"Because Asaba is in it."

Yet.

Under the summer sky of UFOs, a wimp like Asaba could only lie motionless, on his back, on the roof. How long did he intend to remain in that state? The wind quelled, the tiles against his back were as hot as ever, from the music room wafted a lifeless melody played seemingly at random by the brass band, and somewhere on school grounds a ball was hit by a metal bat.

Despite all that, all Asaba could hear was the warbling of the cicadas.

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## Translation Notes

<sup>1</sup> Silver Star Medal, or Silver Star: Wikipedia link [here](#)

# Chapter 3 – The Correct Way to Steal a Moped I

## (Part 1)

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Hair sprouted.

For a reason that was all too easy to understand.

For this reason, Asaba Yuuko, then in Elementary Five, refused to get into the bath with her elder brother, who was a year older.

After that, they no longer played with each other.

Nor did they go out of the house together.

She also refused to use the room she had shared with her brother up till then, threatening to run away from home if their parents did not allow her to have her own room.

As it was, her brother could not fathom what led to this abrupt change of heart. He got yelled at whenever he invited her to play with him, got ignored whenever he asked her if she would like to go outside with him, and would get things thrown at him whenever he slid open the paper sliding door to her room without knocking to tell her the bath was ready. Days like these continued for a while.

Asaba Yuuko could only sit in her room by herself as she cursed her elder brother who never seemed to grow up.

She always seemed to be down on luck. Since her family name was “Asaba”, if there was nobody else with a family name starting with ‘A’ in her class, she would be seat number one. Nothing good ever came of being seat number one.

Be it vaccinations against viruses used as biological weapons, or the vaulting box (that was set too high on purpose, she was sure), she would always be the first person in class to face whatever challenge that came. She never had time to brace herself, never had a shoulder in front of her to lean on. Things had always been like that for her.

It wasn't fair.

He was her elder brother, and a year older, too.

Days like these continued for a while and eventually, Asaba started to leave his sister alone. She rose to Elementary Six, while he became a first-year student at Sonohara Middle School. Although they no longer shared rooms, they still saw each other at mealtimes. Thus, even with the way she treated her brother, Yuuko knew that he was in the Journalism Club and had a slightly unusual *senpai* called Suizenji.

Sleeping in different rooms and going to different schools.

In hindsight, those might have been the most peaceful days she had ever known.

An uneventful year came and went, and Asaba Yuuko of Sonohara First Elementary School, Class 6-3, seat number one, became Asaba Yuuko of Sonohara Middle School, Class 1-1, seat number one. It was only when she began commuting to the same school as her brother did she notice how much her brother looked like an obsequious follower of Suizenji Kunihiro, who was paralleled to none in the school for his eccentricity.

Yet again, it was impossible for her to say something like “That goldfish shit over there is my elder brother”. It was a delicate period for her as she was still making new friends in a new class in a new school. She might just be ostracized if everyone found out that he was her brother.

At least that dimwitted brother of hers was somewhat aware of this and there was a period of time which he, of his own accord, pretended not to know her in school, presumably in a bid to preserve her honor and dignity. Despite his efforts, Yuuko put him under very, very strict orders. This was her extremely dimwitted brother she was talking about. She had to clearly verbalize her request to bring across her message and make doubly sure that he understood before she could put her mind at ease.

—do not ever, under any circumstances, speak to me in school.

She had believed, foolishly, that such desperate measures would not be in vain. Even though her school was in a rural area and did not have a very large

enrollment of students, she had believed that she would be able to carry this secret to her grave.

However, there were many ways in which a secret could become public knowledge.

One month had passed since the opening ceremony, and one day during lunch break in her classroom:

“Is Asaba-kun here?”

Of all the ways her secret could have been made public:

“Special Correspondent Asaba Naoyuki’s younger sister, Asaba Yuuko! My family name is Suizenji and my name is Kunihiro. I am from Sonohara Town Ritsuenbara Middle School, Class 3-2, Solar System Radio Wave Newspaper, and I have come to call on you and offer my greetings! Asaba Yuuko-kun! If you are here, do raise your hand, no need to be shy!”

Her logical side told her that it was unreasonable to put all of the blame on her brother.

However, since that incident during lunch break, Yuuko would refuse to speak to her brother if she had no good reason to, not only in school but at home as well.

The first semester ended and summer vacation arrived.

Her brother spent his entire vacation out in the mountains somewhere building secret bases or something like that.

With Suizenji, of course, and he most certainly did not do his homework.

She heard that he was hunting for UFOs.

On the last night of the summer vacation, as Yuuko was leaning backward in the bathtub, which was not very large, with the scented bathwater right up to just below her nose, she thought of the last time she had soaked in the bathtub together with her brother.

At that time, her brother was in Elementary Six.

At that time, her brother did not have hair.

Her brother might still be like that for all she knew. She might just have to continue walking on by herself, as she had done so all this while. She didn't think that a time when her brother walked in front of her would come.

Summer vacation ended and the second semester began.

Just two days later, during the Sonohara Middle School's monthly air-raid drill, Asaba Naoyuki became embroiled in the maelstrom that was whipped up in the aftermath of the incident, now better known as the 'Incident at the Shelter'.



That was the reason Yuuko went up to the second floor without uttering a word of complaint when her mother said "I need to put the dishes away, so go wake your brother up for breakfast," a very rare occurrence indeed. Her mother, who asked her to do so with nothing to lose, looked on wide-eyed with a dishcloth in her hand:

"—I wonder what happened to her."

Beside her, without even looking up from the Sunday newspaper, her father went:

"—what's wrong with that? Can't a sister go wake her brother up?"

"Not that she can't—but you know, just two days ago, when Naoyuki forgot his lunchbox again, I asked her to bring it to him but she said 'No, not in a million years.'"

Her father sniffed. After contemplating it for a while, he concluded, with a single nod and grunt:

"Well, they're at a difficult age after all."

Without lifting his eyes from the newspaper, he reached across the low dining table for a packet of Lucky Strike cigarettes and a 100-yen lighter, which her mother swiftly grabbed from under his fingers before slipping them into her stain covered apron pocket. Her father grunted once but did not look up.

"Estimated 2000 dead. Maybe there'll be people ready to roll up their sleeves for a fight this time."

“Where is it? Show me,” said her mother as she leaned sideways to press her cheek against her husband’s, peering into his paper as she looked for the article on the aerial bombings. The scene was a peek into the past of how they behaved in their youth. Their mother would occasionally show her softer side when Naoyuki and Yuuko were not looking. Their father continued reading the article, his hands continuing to search the top of the dining table for a packet of cigarettes that wasn’t there, like they always had.

“Maybe we should increase the size of our stockpile,” she said.

“Stockpile?”

“Canned food, toilet paper, and the like. Just in case something happens. Oh right, did you hear? Just recently, there were talks of spies being seen around Sonohara Air Base. Yoshida-san’s wife was saying that after that, a huge bunch of policemen appeared and set up checkpoints. They performed checks on every car that passed by, causing a lot of trouble for everyone.”

“Spies have to report for work every day without rest, don’t they? They must have it hard.”

“This isn’t something you should be joking about—jeez. It’s all because of that military base. The spies must have come into this area because they wanted to keep an eye on Sonohara Air Base, don’t you think? Seriously, I wonder why they built such a large compound in the middle of the countryside...”

“It’s precisely because we’re in the countryside. They couldn’t have built a compound that large in the middle of the city. Air bases need landing strips which require them to be that size.”

“But aren’t there other rural areas to build on? I wish they went somewhere else.”

“Even if you say that, a lot of them drop by our shop, don’t they? Those people from GI.”

“No matter how profitable it is for our shop, it’ll all come to nothing if we lose our lives. Kiyohara-san’s wife was saying that those spies might plant some sort of virus around the base, and that the people living around the base might get entangled in the conflict and lose their lives as well, or at least, that’s what she

saw in a special TV program...”

“That’s why they’ve been destroying those factories producing bioweapons like those by dropping bombs on them, haven’t they? Those planes from the Sonohara Air Base.”

“When was it again? Remember that time when they bombed a factory they thought was making viruses but discovered that it was just a normal factory producing rice wine or something like that? Many politicians were forced to step down. That might be something those people over there claim, but the situation might be much worse than we think...”

“You mean the Rangrim Bombing this April? No, that factory really was a rice wine factory.”

The mother’s eyes grew round.

“Really?”

The father scratched at his son’s old jersey vigorously to get at an itch on his rather scrawny behind.

“You could make bioweapons in a rice wine factory, you know. You could just say that you need some strains to make bioweapons for scientific studies, and you could buy them at a price of, say, Naoyuki’s allowance. Level 4 bio-safety airlock chambers and explosive aerosol labs are huge and cost tons of money, but you only need them for research and development. You don’t need anything that extravagant for mass production. Bioreactors nowadays are smaller than refrigerators, and you can hide one of those anywhere. It’s still fine if those people use rice wine factories as a cover-up for their operations, but, sooner or later, they might start using places like elementary schools or kindergartens.”

The mother turned to face her husband who was right beside her, a glimmer of respect in her eyes.

“You seem to be very well-informed,” she said.

“Like I said, a lot of them come by our shop. Those people from GI.”

The phone rang just then and the mother half-rose to her feet as she

answered, “Coming, coming.” But, the phone rang only twice before suddenly falling silent, with the ‘line busy’ light flickering on. Yuuko probably answered the phone using the extension phone on the corridor on the second floor. Her mother remained standing as she stretched her back, remembering that she should put away the dishes.

Out of the blue, she wondered out loud:

“If they really do start making bioweapons in kindergartens, I wonder if they’ll drop bombs on the kindergartens, too.”

Their father had finished reading most of the articles in the Sunday newspaper. The paper rustled as he folded it up untidily. With another grunt accompanied by a nod, he concluded:

“Well, these are difficult times, after all.”

Then, he looked hard across the top of the dining table and finally realized that his cigarettes and lighter, which were most definitely there before, had disappeared.

Yuuko climbed the stairs to the second floor and hovered in front of the paper sliding door to her brother’s room, not knowing what to do. When the extension phone hanging on the wall rang, her face showed a relieved expression as she hurried to pick it up before it even rang three times.

“Hello, this is Asaba speaking.”

A highly-strung voice that was bursting with far too much energy for a morning this early answered:

“Oh, by that voice, you must be Asaba-kun!”

It was Suizenji.

On an unrelated note, Suizenji usually addressed Asaba Naoyuki as ‘Special Correspondent Asaba’, so ‘Asaba-kun’ would refer to Asaba Yuuko.

However, Yuuko didn’t feel happy about being called ‘Asaba-kun’. She didn’t feel too happy about being called anything else, either. She didn’t want to hear Suizenji’s voice to begin with.

It had been such a nice Sunday morning up till then too.



However, as far as Yuuko knew, Suizenji had never made a call to her house before. She heard from Asaba that Suizenji disliked phones because “there is a constant danger of our phones being bugged and someone listening in to our conversation,” as if he was playing some childish secret agent game.

“If you’re looking for my brother, he’s still sleeping.”

Suizenji chuckled.

“I thought as much. My apologies, but would you rouse him for me? Special Correspondent Asaba has a very important mission to accomplish today.”

A very important mission.

Yuuko hadn’t expected Suizenji to call her house, especially if his ‘mission’ involved chasing after ghosts or aliens or something like that.

“—but well, Special Correspondent Asaba being a sleepyhead is bothersome, isn’t it? I can almost imagine him to be the type of person who would get all nervous and excited for a school excursion and be unable to sleep a wink the night before. And when morning comes, he would be completely limp with exhaustion but still force himself to go on the trip. Halfway through the trip he would throw up in the most magnificent way possible, thereby earning for himself the nickname ‘Puke-yuki’ from his friends or something along those lines—hello, are you listening to me? Asaba Yuuko, please respond!”

Yuuko chose that moment to press the ‘hold call’ button, cutting off Suizenji’s voluble speech. It was almost painful to continue listening to Suizenji’s voice, but, somewhere inside her heart, she also felt just a little impressed. Even if it was just for a guerrilla group, it seemed like he wasn’t calling himself an editor-in-chief just for show. He really did pay a lot of attention to people around him. How else would he be able to guess her brother’s nickname correctly?

With the extension phone in one hand, Yuuko stood in front of the paper sliding door to her brother’s room.

She knocked it but received no reply.

She tried knocking it again, harder than before, but still, there was no reply.

Taking a deep breath and steeling her resolve, she slid open the door as hard

she could. In a room that was six tatami mats large, Asaba lay crooked on his bedding on the floor, sleeping in a position that would bring to mind a refugee who ran out of stamina and collapsed on that spot.

Yuuko tried poking her sleeping brother with a finger.

Her brother didn't wake up. He didn't even stir.

She peered into her brother's face, which was on its side as he lay sleeping on his stomach. As she continued to look into the face of someone completely dead to the world, Yuuko, for some reason, became extremely irritated.

She suddenly grabbed his ear and pulled, shouting into it:

*"Honii-chan!"*

She intended to say, *"Onii-chan"*, but perhaps it was because she spoke with a bit of a lisp, when she raised her voice, it sounded a little different from what she intended.

In any case, Asaba leaped out of his bedding. Blinking sleep from his eyes, he saw his sister's glowering face right in front of his and could only stare at it in blank amazement.

He couldn't understand what was going on. What was his sister, who usually refused to even speak to him, doing in his room?

Also, for some reason, his sister, who stood before him, thrust a phone at him and said:

*"A call from your crime syndicate leader."*

Asaba wondered who this crime syndicate leader she mentioned was as he took the phone from her and pressed the 'hold call' button. Not quite awake, he murmured sleepily into the phone:

*"Hello?"*

He could hear the Mission Impossible theme song playing from the other end of the line. It sounded as if someone was playing music from a small tape recorder of sorts and holding it near the receiver. Oh, it's just Chief, thought Asaba. Feeling sleepy again, he flopped back on his bed and covered his face with his arms, shielding his eyes from the morning sun.

“Good morning, Special Correspondent Asaba. Well then, your mission today is...”

Asaba made an involuntary sound of alarm.

He remembered now. Any trace of sleepiness vanished as he leaped out of his bedding once more and started crawling around. Where was his clock? Where was the alarm clock that was supposed to be right next to his pillow...?

“Rest easy, Special Correspondent Asaba. The time now is 9:32 AM, so if you make haste you could still make it with much time to spare. I have already counseled you yesterday regarding important points to take note while carrying out your mission. Do you remember them?”

Asaba had been so nervous that he was unable to sleep last night.

The more pressure he put on himself to get some rest for tomorrow, the more awake he felt. While he tossed and turned in anguish, the night sky turned bright, and by the time his alarm clock, which he had set to ring at 7:00 AM intending to get up early, finally started to ring, he remembered feeling a mix of despair and resolve. It's no use now, he'll never be able to get up on time even if he were to fall asleep now. There was no other choice but to get through today without sleeping the night before. The very moment he decided to do that, he relieved himself from the pressure of 'I must get some rest' and immediately began to feel drowsy. No, I mustn't sleep, I most definitely cannot fall asleep, he thought to himself but his consciousness broke off somewhere about there. The next moment, his sister was pulling his ear and trying to get him out of bed.

The nervousness that was tormenting Asaba the entire night before came rushing back.

Instinctively, his grip on the extension phone tightened as he rummaged through the memory bin in his head. Important points to note regarding his mission, the counsel he received yesterday...

“—w-what were they, again?” he implored Suizenji.

“Check if your nose hair is sticking out, check if your fly is unzipped, and check if you are wearing a fresh pair of underpants. Three points, that's all. Repeat

after me.”

“Nose hair, fly, fresh underpants.”

“Excellent. Well then, please make your preparations with haste. I pray for your success.”

Suizenji hung up right after that.

Asaba threw down the extension phone and stood up, thinking that he should probably get changed quickly. He was just about to pull down the pants of his pajamas along with a rather old pair of underpants at the same time when a scream suddenly rocked the room.

“Stupid! Idiot, idiot, idiot! Pervert!”

His sister hurriedly turned her back on him before letting loose a string of verbal abuse.

Oh, she was still here, Asaba thought, as he went:

“W-What is it?”

His sister went quiet for a while. Then,

“Mom says you should hurry up and eat your breakfast.”

Under normal circumstances, his sister would never deign to enter his room just to tell him something like that. He was certain of that. There must be something else, he decided.

“Anything else?”

His sister fell silent once more. Her back was turned, but it was radiating curiosity, as if she had something she would very much like to ask him. Shortly after:

“Stu—pid jerk!”

With those parting words, his sister left his room. She gave him one last glare before flinging the paper sliding door across her, slamming it shut with enough force to make Asaba flinch away from it.

Asaba was dumbfounded. What on earth was that about?

He then came back to his senses. This was not the time to be worrying about things like that. As he ransacked his closet, the first outfit he managed to get his hands on was a T-shirt that was worn thin and a pair of jeans which he had been wearing for a year. It looked like something he would wear to go out in the middle of the night to buy juice from a vending machine nearby, but he no longer had the time to worry about things like that.

His alarm clock, which was sitting pitifully in a corner after rolling there, seemed to look at him accusingly as it showed just how quickly and mercilessly time was ticking away for him. It read 9:35 AM. After stuffing his watch, purse, and bicycle keys into his pocket, Asaba rushed out of the room. Grabbing the handrail of the staircase, he slid on it all the way down to the first floor before stomping along the entire length of the corridor. He burst into the washroom only to find someone else already there: his father, wearing his jersey and running vest.

His father smoked, so whenever he stuck a toothbrush into his mouth to brush his teeth he would dry-heave again and again, so loudly that it sounded like thunder. He had always done that, which is why no one in the house paid him any heed when he did.

*“Oge, Oeee! Uuuuoooooooooooo! —oh. Morning, Naoyuki.”*

Asaba, without saying anything, forcibly wedged himself beside his father, and while bumping shoulders with him proceeded to brush his teeth, wash his face, and—

“You going somewhere?”

Asaba jumped upon hearing that question. He had been fumbling about with his hair, wondering if there was anything else he could do for it.

He answered, “Club activities.” It wasn’t a lie. At least, not really.

His father replied, “Sounds rough.”

Nose hair, check. Fly, check.

He then ran out of the washroom with his laundry basket in his arms, passing by his mother on his way out.

“Naoyuki, what about breakfast?”

“I don’t need any!”

“Wait, where are you going?”

He stopped for a moment to peek into the sitting room. The pendulum clock in it, which was older than the house itself, urged Asaba along. It read 9:46 AM.

“I’ll be home late today!” said Asaba as he glided to a stop at the kitchen door to put on his shoes. The shoelaces on his high-cut sneakers annoyed him to no end.

“Naoyuki!”

His father’s voice rang out from the washroom.

“If you’re going out, spin the barber pole in front for me, will you!”

Asaba did not deign to reply as he left the house through the kitchen door.

He tiptoed past the empty crates of beer bottles while pushing his bicycle around the house to the front. When he shoved the plug for the pole into its socket, red arteries, blue veins, and white bandages started to turn round and round in a helix of colored stripes on the barber’s pole. There was a tag hanging on the door that said ‘CLOSED’. Asaba turned it over so that it read ‘OPEN’.

Straddling his bicycle and putting his feet on the pedals, he was just about to push off but thought better of it. He decided to bring his face close to the large window in front of the house which still had its shutters down behind it just so that he could take one last look at his nose hair. The reflection of Asaba’s face as he ogled at his nostrils looked strikingly like a monkey sticking his face into the window. Overlapping that reflection were two words, written in fluorescent paint:

“Asaba Barbershop”

It was the first Sunday of the second semester.

The one and half month long summer vacation was merely a period of time that people of this world defined to suit themselves. Summer had yet to end. The sky that stretched out above Asaba Barbershop today and the sky during the period which Asaba didn’t need to go to school were both the same vast

expanse of blue, cut into sections by wooden telegraph poles and the electric cables that hung, sagging, from them. The cicadas were warbling, and cargo aircraft and fighter jets were flying overhead in a summer sky which might just be carrying UFOs, too.

Asaba only had ten minutes to reach the bus terminal in front of Sonohara Station.

Sweat poured off his brow, and his bike chain threatened to break off as he worked the pedals.



Let's rewind to a day before, the first Saturday of the second semester.

Lessons ended at midday, and lunch was a rice ball from the school co-op. Asaba Naoyuki was in the Journalism Club's clubroom, twirling a pair of scissors like the actors did with guns in Western cowboy films. This pair of scissors were different from the ones you saw around; it was a pair of hairdressing scissors that his father had decommissioned, but it could still cut fairly well. Suizenji was sitting with his back to Asaba, with hair repellent cloth draped around him. The official name of this cloth was 'salon cape', and its Japanese name was *karinuno*.

As always, Asaba would still ask, just for the sake of asking.

"How would you like it done?"

"I'd like it longer than it is now."

"I can't do that."

"I'll have the usual, then."

Suizenji was the sort of person who could dress to kill if the need arose. If there was none, he couldn't give a rat's ass about something like his hairstyle. His 'usual' haircut just referred to trimming his entire head's worth of hair and tidying the ends of his bangs. To Asaba, a job like that was nothing.

He muttered, "Got it," and began to snip away with his scissors. He seemed to be quite at home with using it.

One haircut was 100 yen.

At first, he was simply a machine that mass produced buzz-cuts for boys from sports clubs.

However, he always charged 100 yen, no matter what his customers asked for. This meant that his customers could do whatever they wanted with the money they had wrangled from their parents for their haircuts, minus 100 yen. Lately, his pool of regular customers had expanded to include not only boys with buzz-cuts but others as well.

Asaba was rather confident in his hair-cutting skills, so he thought that 100 yen for any sort of haircut was a very cheap price to pay indeed. However, he continued to provide his services not so much for the profit but for the pleasure he derived from trimming heads.

“How has business been doing lately?”

“It’s doing alright.”

Even the banter was stuffy, like the kind one would exchange with a barber.

“Ah, but I think it’ll get a little busier from now on. I mean, most sports competitions are held in September, after all.”

“Nevertheless, Special Correspondent Asaba, doesn’t your family run a barbershop, too? If you trim your classmates’ hair for a price so low that it is almost akin to dumping<sup>1</sup>, doesn’t that mean you are stealing customers from your family’s barbershop?”

“It’s okay. Our classmates won’t come to our shop anyway.”

“Why not?”

“Maybe they’d be too embarrassed to, I don’t know, ‘go to *that* person’s house to get a haircut from *that* person’s father’? Especially if my house is in their neighborhood or if they knew me by sight. I understand how they feel, since I won’t really want to buy things at a shop run by my friends’ parents, too.”

So that’s how it is, mused Suizenji.

Asaba took up a pair of thinning scissors and some of Suizenji’s jet black hair fell with each snip of his scissors. If he had to say who had the healthiest hair



amongst the people he serviced, Suizenji would be an easy pick. Perhaps it was because he usually didn't use hairstyling products or a hairdryer. Plus, he ate well and seemed free of any stress whatsoever.

“—about what we spoke about earlier, is there anything that can be done about it?”

Asaba tried to play dumb.

“What was this about, again?”

“About Special Correspondent Iriya. Ah jeez, I didn't think she was a girl that would be quite so ungenerous in spirit.”

“—I don't think that she doesn't want to help us. I'm sure there's some sort of rule in place that disallows outsiders from entering the base, and well, given the current situation...”

“But then again, a loophole must accompany such a rule. Can't she, for friendship's sake, do something about—”

“Friendship? We've only just gotten to know her.”

“Still, she needn't have turned us down so brusquely. She could have gone, ‘I tried asking someone even though I knew it was impossible, and as I expected, their answer was a no.’ But she refused us on the spot, you know, like right off the bat—”

Iriya had said, no.

Suizenji had moved to acquire Iriya because she lived in Sonohara Air Base, hoping that Iriya might be able to show them the inside of the base. As per his wishes, Iriya had acquiesced to his invitation and joined the club. The first time Iriya showed up in the clubroom was two days ago, on Thursday, and Suizenji had made his request straightaway. Special Correspondent Iriya, I heard you stayed in the living quarters of Sonohara Air Base, by all means—

No.

“Hmm, like I was saying, she must have said that because she didn't want to help. Special Correspondent Asaba, is she always ‘like that’? If she, despite being a transfer student, acts like this, won't she have no friends in her class?”

Well, it's true that she doesn't have any, and even if she had to decline, there were more amicable ways to do so. Such thoughts did cross Asaba's mind. However, he also knew that it was unreasonable to expect Iriya to be affable. She always was 'like that', after all.

That was why she had no friends.

He felt like speaking in her defense.

"Perhaps someone had already warned her in advance, that she was not to bring back any friends."

Asaba's hands stopped as he considered something else.

This was a likely outcome but— if Iriya continued to refuse Suizenji's demands, what would happen? Suizenji would never see having more girls in the club as a good thing. The moment he realized that there was no hope of getting what he wanted, he might tell her to leave the club.

He'd say something like, we don't need the extra headcount.

"—then again, she's still manpower we could use," said Asaba, as his hands started moving again.

"Perhaps if we ask her again after she warms up to us, she would do something to help us. Furthermore, it isn't polite to keep bringing up the fact that she stays on the base, you know. Oh, please look down for a bit."

"Why isn't it polite?"

"Because. She happily joined our club because you invited her to, but you keep going 'bring us into the base, bring us into the base'. Wouldn't that sound like you thought she was only good for the fact that she lives in the base, and that you didn't expect her to be of help in any other way? No one would be very happy to hear something like that all the time."

Mmf, Suizenji grunted.

"I see. You have a point there."

"Right? That is why, if you take the long view..."

"In other words, you are saying that we should find a better way to ask for her

help without hurting her feelings. And it'll be best if we could induce Special Correspondent Iriya herself to rack her brains to figure out how we could enter the base, am I right?"

"Hello, Chief? Erm, that wasn't what I said—"

Chief disliked tactical waiting, or camping, as some would call it. Asaba could almost feel the cogs in the head he held in his hands start to turn.

He sighed.

It was not as if he didn't understand why Suizenji wanted to rush things.

Sonohara Air Base was large, had both the US Air Force and the Japanese Self Defense Air Force stationed in it, and was the base of many offensive operations. That was why it was also a base shrouded in secrecy, and also why spies frequently appeared around the area. Asaba had heard that even the mass media had difficulty securing interviews or site visits. Perhaps it was the strict security that fuelled rumors such as 'the Sonohara Air Base might be launching UFOs'.

Therefore, even if they did not find the remains of a UFO or alien carcasses, as long as they could enter the base and write a report on their findings, the article they'd publish would most definitely be an unprecedented journalistic scoop for a school newspaper. The chance to do so appeared right in front of them in the form of Iriya, and it was natural that she had Suizenji bouncing on the balls of his feet in excitement.

"—!"

Asaba could have sworn he heard something like a chime of a doorbell.

Suizenji had thought of an idea. Asaba could distinctly feel it pop into his head with his fingers.

"Since it has come to this,"

Asaba readied himself for it. It was probably another one of his nonsensical ideas. He usually verbalized them after starting his sentence with "since it has come to this".

"Special Correspondent Asaba, this is an order from your editor-in-chief. Go

on a date with Special Correspondent Iriya.”

“—harh?”

Asaba’s hands came to an abrupt stop. Suizenji nodded furiously, with his head still in Asaba’s hands.

“It’s a good thing that tomorrow is a Sunday. Why don’t you start the date by going for a movie? Then you could head to a café and then to a karaoke box and then to a hotel and then go as far as there is to go. How does that sound? If you need a car, I’ll lend you the mini pickup.”

“—e-erm,”

Asaba’s head was making rumbling noises. His brain was suffering from indigestion.

*Why would Suizenji think of something like this?*

Suizenji continued, “I mean, it goes without saying that the date is meant for you to get on intimate terms with her as soon as possible. She won’t be able to squarely refuse a ‘someone who weighed heavily on her mind’ if he asked her something like ‘Can I see your room’, will she?”

His brain began to suffer from diarrhea instead, and it proceeded to relieve its bowels via his mouth.

*I mean, there was no need to go so far as to do something like that, is there?*

Suizenji continued speaking, “You can’t not do it. We can’t be waiting around for her to warm up to us. Although it *is* true that Sonohara Air Base prohibits outsiders from entering their compound, the point is to get Iriya to do something about that for us. This is a ploy often used by spies. If all goes well, she’ll go to you herself and say something like ‘there’s no one at home now’, you know.”

*And, when that time comes, do you intend to be there as well?*

Suizenji turned to look at Asaba over his right shoulder.

“Special Correspondent Asaba, you can do it.”

Feeling like he was being driven to a corner, Asaba said:

“W-What! No! I can’t do something like that!”

To which Suizenji raised his eyebrows theatrically, and then shrugged.

“I see. Then I’ll do it.”

—!!

Suizenji was smart and handsome. He was good at sports and tall to boot. He did not have the slightest interest in women but would stop at nothing to get what he wanted.

Yes, Suizenji was that sort of person.

“I understand, I’ll do it!!” Before he realized it, Asaba had shouted that out loud.

Suizenji looked slightly taken aback as he said, “Ah, but you needn’t force yourself to do it.”

“No, I will do it! Please let me do it!!” Asaba was at his wit’s end.

Suizenji gave him a sideward glance before grinning widely.

“Then I shall leave it to you. I’m counting on you, Special Correspondent Asaba, to successfully bring to light the mystery that is hidden in Sonohara Air Base!”

Upon these words, Asaba woke up from his bout of insanity. He turned pale, realizing that he had agreed to take on an outrageous task.

To take Iriya on a date.

He didn’t know if it would go well. He thought that it probably would not.

In the first place, he didn’t know if she would agree to one. He thought that she probably would not.

“E-Erm, but I have never taken anyone on a date before.”

There was the sound of the doorknob turning on the door to the clubroom.

“Don’t worry. Neither have I.”

“Harh?! Then what was that self-assured attitude from just now?”

The door opened, and it was immediately shut.

Suizenji continued light-heartedly, “No need to lose your head, Special Correspondent Asaba. She’ll be ours if you manage to kiss her, you know. Just one kiss.”

Unable to bear the mounting anxiety and stress and wanting to blame someone for it, Asaba lashed out at Suizenji in his frustration.

“What do you mean by ‘just one kiss’? In the first place, if you haven’t even been on a date with a girl before, what basis do you have to be saying something like that?”

“What are you doing?” said a voice behind him, and Asaba answered:

“Shush, we’re talking about something important now!”

He whipped around and found Iriya standing there.

“Special Correspondent Asaba it’s poking me, your scissors are poking into me and it hurts, it hurts very much indeed Special Correspondent Asaba please respond, please respond!”

Asaba hurriedly pulled back his scissors, and Suizenji went “Ow, that hurt,” while rubbing his head.

Iriya stared at Suizenji sitting on the chair looking like one of those paper dolls children would make as talismans for good weather<sup>2</sup> and then at Asaba standing frozen in place, scissors in hand. Her eyes were wide.

“E-Erm.”

He was beside himself with worry, wondering if Iriya had been listening in from the very beginning.

“When did you come in?”

“Just now.”

And once again, she asked:

“—what are you doing?”

Suizenji answered her for him.

“It’s just as you see it. I am getting my hair cut by Special Correspondent Asaba. Asaba is the son of a barber, and cutting hair is his specialty. Oh right,

according to a source I have, when Asaba was still in elementary school, he would put his little sister to sleep on a barber chair, then he would play some extremely filthy game that involved performing remodeling surgery on—“

“Chief.”

Asaba jabbed his scissors to Suizenji’s throat and forced him to be quiet. He then started to move his hands once more, focusing on the job of trimming the ends of Suizenji’s hair.

Or rather, he tried to focus.

There are things you can do on this Earth, and there are things you simply can’t.

He sneaked a peek at Iriya and found her leaning in and staring at him work with her mouth half hanging open. When their eyes met, she quickly looked down.

—?

What was that, Asaba wondered. Perhaps a person cutting hair was a rare sight for her.

*Thunk.*

He felt something bump into his stomach. When he looked down, he saw that Suizenji had nudged him with an elbow, presumably to urge him into taking action.

Despite that, Asaba couldn’t find his resolve. He tried to preoccupy himself with his work and his scissors, but his mind drifted elsewhere. *What would he do if she refused?* Suizenji then started to clear his throat like a bad actor hamming it up in a TV drama. *Hey, Iriya. Are you free tomorrow? If you are, would you like to watch a movie with me or something like—*

*No.*

“—is this length okay?”

Asaba held up a mirror he had pilfered from the gym toilet to reflect the back of Suizenji’s head.

“Mmf. Well done.”

Suizenji stuck his right hand out of the hair covered sheet to flick a 100 yen coin at Asaba with his thumb, and Asaba caught it from somewhere behind his left ear. Even whilst he stood, stretched, and dusted off stray hairs from his shirt, Suizenji kept giving Asaba looks that said, “Go, go!” every time their eyes met. Asaba, not knowing where he should start, decided to pick up the broom and dustpan to sweep up the hairs that lay scattered on the floor.

Three things happened, almost at the same time.

First, Suizenji lost his patience with Asaba’s cowardice. In a loud voice:

“Special Correspondent Iriya, I have something important to discuss with you! How is your schedule like tomorrow—”

Second, Asaba took a deep breath, and:

“Wahhh! Please wait, Chief!”

Third, Sudou Akira burst into the room.

“Sorry I’m late! I got caught by Kawaguchi.”

Akiho threw her bag down on the table and wiped the sweat from her brow. Upon realizing that Iriya was in the room as well, her expression changed to one that plainly said: “What, you were here too?”

Shortly after:

“—what are you all doing?”

Perhaps spotting something that was extremely telling, Akiho immediately sensed the conspiratorial atmosphere that hung over the clubroom. She scanned the room suspiciously, like a bomb waiting to go off. Asaba, who was sweeping up hair on the floor, wouldn’t make eye contact with her for some reason, and his hairdressing tools were out on the table. Iriya was standing there like a statue, with her bag still in her hand. Suizenji, whose hair looked neater than it did when she happened to see him in the morning, was drawing some sort of schematic on the whiteboard—

“I have something important to discuss with you for tomorrow, Special Correspondent Iriya, so listen up. Number one! We will capture our target by



conquering three things, namely, the handle lock, the main switch, and the immobilizer! The usual brute force methods for overcoming the handle lock and main switch still work, so all that remains is the immobilizer! The immobilizer is simply a device that stops the supply of fuel and prevents the vehicle from starting if a digital lock is not discharged by a key. Furthermore, they sometimes work in tandem with alarms outfitted with vibration sensors, so if you trigger it by carelessly shaking the vehicle too much, an alarm will sound at full blast—“

“Chief.”

“Yes, Special Correspondent Sudou.”

“What are you doing?”

“It’s just as you see it, Special Correspondent Iriya’s induction course. This is to help her become a fully-fledged journalist as soon as possible.”

“—erm, like I was asking, what on earth is this all about? You’ve been talking about switches and sensors and whatnot since just now.”

“The topic for today is ‘The Correct Way to Steal a Moped’.”

“How is that supposed to be an induction course for a new member of our club?!”

“What are you saying?! How can a fully-fledged journalist be unable to figure out something like this! Look, the quest for a scoop is accompanied by a certain degree of danger, no? You might have to shake off violent interview subjects or unsympathetic government officials, so this is a skill you would most definitely need to—“

Suizenji paused and threw Asaba a fleeting glance followed by a brief wink.

“—oh right, I remember now. Special Correspondent Sudou, could I have a few minutes of your time? I have a very important favor to ask of you.”

“W-What’s this about?”

“Oh no, we can’t have that discussion here. I’ll need to speak to you privately.”

After that, Suizenji moved so quickly that no one had a chance to object.

“Alrighty. Well then, Special Correspondent Iriya, my lecture for today ends here, but please go over all the points again when you get home. It’ll be even better if you could get some hands-on training.”

Swiftly, he opened the door in front of him. Akiho looked like she still had something to say, but Suizenji, pushing her hard on the back, left the room with her.

Just before the door was shut, a right arm stuck itself back into the room to give Asaba an exuberant thumbs up.

It’ll bring me nothing but trouble if you do that, Asaba thought.

Asaba decided that he should just finish sweeping up all the hair on the floor before doing anything else.

Emptying the contents of the dustpan into a makeshift trash bin, a cardboard box, and putting away the broom into its locker, Asaba finally let out a sigh.

What a close call.

If Akiho had caught wind of the fact that he was going on a date with Iriya with the aim of getting her to bring them into the base, she would be absolutely livid, no doubt. Furthermore, she seemed to dislike Iriya very much. It was natural that she would be disliked by all the girls in his class after that “go away” remark of hers, and as long as Akiho was also one of those girls in his class—

Yet, something didn’t feel quite right.

He thought that Akiho usually didn’t react this way.

“Asaba.”

Someone called out to him.

“Yes?” he answered absentmindedly as he stretched his back muscles, with the locker in front of his face.

“How many digits are there in the cipher to the immobilizer?”

—huh?

Asaba turned around to find Iriya looking very hard at the whiteboard, and

he, too, stared at the wiggly lines on the schematic that Suizenji had scrawled on the board in water-based ink.

“—ah, it’s okay really, you don’t need to bother about Chief. This is probably something he said off the top of his head. Oh, by the way.”

His courage crumbled.

“Why don’t you put your bag over there?”

Iriya obliged, and placed her bag on the table.

“Are you free tomorrow?”

He said it.

Iriya’s eyes grew wide again, like she was suddenly asked a question she hadn’t been expecting.

Her reply went like this.

“Why?”

Say it.

And expect the worst answer he could receive.

Asaba willed himself to speak. He could no longer look at Iriya’s face.

“If, if it is okay with you, would you like to see a movie? With me.”

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## Translation Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dumping (in economics): Wikipedia link [here](#). (Holy moly. They’re 14 and 15-year-olds, right?)

<sup>2</sup> Teru Teru Bōzu: Wikipedia link [here](#). See picture. Suizenji probably looked like one in his salon cape.

## (Part 2)

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Let us return to the first Sunday of the second semester, the morning of the date.

When people in Sonohara said “Let’s go to town” or “Let’s take a look around town”, ‘town’ referred to an area in the middle of Sonohara Town which encompassed the Municipal Building, government buildings, public facilities and its surrounding areas.

Certainly, it was a place that seemed like a ‘town’. Everything was brand new, clean, and fancy-looking. The roads were wide and generously lined with trees, and on pavements sat the occasional avant-garde sculpture.

But when one took into consideration the countryside that surrounded it, this ‘town’ can be considered somewhat of a ‘distortion’.

Why was the ‘town’ like this? It wasn’t very difficult to see why.

Enomoto, sitting on the passenger’s seat in a light station wagon parked at the road shoulder of the bus terminal in front of Sonohara Station’s South Exit, could sum it up for you in one sentence.

“It’s because of us.”

Shiina Mayumi had her arms crossed over the steering wheel and was resting her chin on it.

“By us— you mean Sonohara Air Base, right?”

“Yeah.”

Enomoto put his seat into a half-reclining position and leaned heavily on the backrest. He let out a huge yawn.

“There’s this huge military base and it comes with so many staff members and soldiers. This town prospers because those fellows spend money here. Is that what you had in mind?” Shiina asked.

“That’s more or less true, but there’s a larger inflow of money coming from somewhere else. You’ll understand if you take a look around the area. Those

with money aren't the local residents, but the local government."

"What do you mean?"

Enomoto remained lying on his back against the backrest. A thin sigh escaped from his nose.

"To put it plainly, our upper-ups went, "We apologize for pressing such a large, dangerous, and fucking controversial military base on you" and bestowed heaps of money on this township for the inconvenience. That's why Sonohara Town is disproportionately wealthy. The public facilities are so complete and perfect that it's almost ridiculous. Do you know how many libraries there are in Sonohara Town alone?"

Enomoto answered his own question:

"Can you believe it, four! Of course, there isn't a soul in those libraries. What will you find just down the road over there? An enormous civic hall. It's a hall so well-equipped that you wouldn't feel embarrassed inviting a world-class orchestra to perform in it. At first, the hall was used as a venue for absurdly large-scale events. Now all it does is host the annual Bon Festival dance in its needlessly spacious car park."

Enomoto gave his watch a brief look while Shiina Mayumi turned to look at the bus terminal's clock. They confirmed that both displayed the same time, 9:50 AM.

"This area does get busy in the afternoon, but since the shops close early, even the main street becomes almost pitch black at night. No one would be walking along it then. Imagine, the trees along the road rustling in the wind, strange sculptures on the pavement looking at you from the shadows, sporadic flashes of light from the road... It'll almost feel like you've wandered into another dimension. Furthermore, bad people gather in groups when it gets dark. You might meet snatch thieves, molesters, bike gangs..."

Enomoto stroked his chin to check that his stubbly beard hadn't grown too long.

"—I heard from someone in the Third Section that rumored sightings of UFOs, ghosts, monsters or stuff like that are much more common in Sonohara Town

than other precincts. Perhaps the reason why Sonohara Town is such a hotbed of rumors is this particular avenue of streets.”

He yawned again; a large, gaping one.

“I’m sleepy,” he said.

“—what. I’ll slap you if you fall asleep on me.”

“Don’t say that. It was really tough, you know, to think of possible locations they would go to, predict the course they would take, and to ‘drain the swamp’ in all surrounding areas. Fuck that Asaba... We almost died between yesterday and today.”

“Isn’t that your job? Why am I getting dragged into this, anyway? I finally got an off-day today, and I had plans to do the laundry, too.”

Shiina Mayumi then sat up with a start, like she suddenly recalled something important.

“—wait.”

“Yeah?”

“They issued one yesterday, didn’t they? A Level Three Standby Alert.”

“Yeah.”

“When was it lifted?”

“Oh... erm. Around five in the morning, according to what was communicated to me.”

“Then, what time did Kana-chan sleep?! She, she’s been waiting there since six in the morning, hasn’t she?”

“No, there was a point of time in the middle of the night when the Standby-Alert dropped to the Level Four, so she should have been able to catch some shut-eye then. For about two hours, I think.”

“Enomoto. Why didn’t you stop her from coming here? If it was a long duration standby order without a sortie<sup>1</sup>, then it’ll be the exact same situation we had at the shelter! Didn’t I explain it to you then? The drugs we kept administering to her during the standby period weren’t depleted, and because

they remained in her bloodstream—“

Enomoto, with both hands flung across his face, croaked wearily:

“That’s why I dragged you out here.”

Silence.

“Fine, go. If you really think she shouldn’t have come, go stop her. It won’t be long before Asaba turns up, but you can still make it.”

Silence.

“She intended to hide today’s appointment from us, you know, and she still thinks we don’t know. How was I supposed to say to her, oh, since you’re meeting him at ten tomorrow morning, you should get some sleep?”

Silence.

“I understand that she could be biting off more than she could chew. She does, too. We’ll just have to prepare ourselves for the worst, won’t we? If nothing happens, all of us will shout hurrah, but if Iriya faints again then all of us will just swoop in on her. I’ll have to rely on you when that happens.”

A sigh, followed by: “—I got it. Two more questions. Some guys from the North have been seen loitering around here again lately, haven’t they? Will Kana-chan be okay? Is she armed?”

“She is. With a 9mm caliber pistol with two rounds missing from its magazine. Nothing turned up during the ‘swamp-draining’ operation we conducted late into the night yesterday, so with respect to that, she should be fine.”

“I have one last question for you. Why, is she wearing her school uniform?”

“I found that strange as well. Couldn’t ask her about it, too. But well... Probably...”

“What.”

“—ah. I might be wrong, though.”

“What?”

“I forgot which paragraph it was in, but I believe there was a rule that said ‘it is preferable that you wear the school uniform when you go outside of the

school compounds' in the Sonohara Middle School rulebook."

"You must be kidding me. I've never seen any of those kids walking around in their school uniforms on a non-school day before."

"Yeah, but you get them sometimes, don't you? A school rule that nobody obeys, and the teachers won't scold you even if you don't follow it because no one remembered there was such a rule in the first place. You'd only find it there if you read the student pocketbook carefully, in black and white."

"—then,"

"I can't think of anything else. She probably agonized over it herself, too, but decided to wear the uniform in the end because she didn't want anyone to think she was some sort of juvenile delinquent."

Both of them had been staring very hard at the same corner of the bus terminal from the other side of the windscreen.

The public buses in Sonohara were almost always empty. That was because the bus services were very frequent even though there weren't very many passengers. That being said, at this time on a Sunday, one would be able to see a fair number of people getting on and off buses at bus platforms 1 to 8 in the bus terminal. According to the bus route on the bus terminal signboard, buses coming from Sonohara Air Base will make their stop at Bus Platform 8, which was at the other end of the roundabout. According to the timetable for Bus Platform 8, the first bus was due to reach the bus terminal today at 5.50 AM.

And waiting there since 5.50 AM, at Bus Platform 8, was Iriya, who stood there motionless throughout.

In her school uniform.

While holding on to a black, oblong-shaped tote bag with many pockets on it.

Even though there was an air-conditioned waiting room with glass windows right beside her, she chose to stand there instead, without moving a hair, her eyes never leaving the exit of the train station. She didn't even look up at the clock. This probably attracted the attention of passers-by; since 5.50 AM, three people had approached her.



The first was a middle-aged man on his way to an early morning session of Japanese croquet. “Which platform should I take the bus from if I want to go to Tonoyama Sports Park?” He asked Iriya, but Iriya completely ignored him.

The second was an elderly woman who was making her usual visit to her orthopedist at Sonohara Community Hospital. She thought that Iriya might have been lost and unsure of which bus to take, so she took it upon herself to give her directions. “Young lady, where do you need to go?” She asked Iriya, but Iriya completely ignored her, as well.

The third person approached her just thirty minutes ago. It was a young American soldier from Sonohara Air Base. It was in the nature of the U.S. troops to extend a hand to a party which they have arbitrarily decided was in need of their help, even if that other party didn’t ask for any. He attempted to do roughly what the elderly woman had done while ignoring the fact that he didn’t speak a word of Japanese. “Hey you lost girl over there, please rest easy knowing that I, this dashing handsome soldier from the Fourth Squadron, is here for you. Where are you going?”

Primly enunciating her words, Iriya only offered two words to him in reply.

Go away.

The fourth person to approach her showed up at 10.04 AM.

This person parked his bicycle at the bicycle parking area on the other side of the train station and ran through the connecting underpass towards the bus terminal, bobbing his head in apology to everyone he bumped into in his hurry. He was practically falling over own feet as he ran up the staircase to the underpass exit. Iriya immediately noticed his figure as he emerged from the exit —

“Ah, Kana-chan is having a nosebleed again.”

Shiina Mayumi instinctively lifted herself off the driver’s seat to lean over the dashboard for a better look, and Enomoto restrained her with an arm as he quickly said:

“It’s okay, it’ll be fine. Asaba will have a handkerchief on him, at least.”

Enomoto rose and briskly grabbed the wireless transceiver that he had

thrown out on the dashboard.

“Men, we’ll be starting now. There is no change in protocol but I’ll repeat myself once more. Kakizaki and Miyajima will be in front, Nagae and Taguchi will be at the back, and we’ll start with Sekiya at the side. I’ll leave the timing of manpower rotation to you. In the unlikely event that you lose sight of them, do not send out a signal to Asaba’s bug. I repeat, do not, in any case, use Asaba’s bug to track him down. Iriya will notice it at once. Station squad and ground squad, send a status report.”

The ‘ground squad’ reported all-clear.

The ‘station squad’ reported that they had a bit of a situation on their hands.

“—harh?” Enomoto squawked into the phone.

Shiina Mayumi, who was starting up the engine, asked, “What is it?”

After listening to the report from the ‘station squad’, Enomoto instructed them to check back with him again in two minutes. Turning to Shiina with a bewildered look on his face, he said:

“They said they noticed someone on Asaba’s tail.”

He had been acting strangely since last night.

If you were to ask her to pinpoint exactly what she had found strange about his behavior, Yuuko wouldn’t be able to put it clearly in words. What Yuuko had felt was a subtle feeling that *something* was out of place. She wouldn’t have noticed that slight difference in demeanor if she hadn’t lived with Asaba under the same roof since she was born.

Her brother wasn’t his usual self.

You know, you usually don’t even want to talk to him, but you sure pay a lot of attention to your *Honii*-chan, don’t you— one should not say something like that to Yuuko, for she would turn bright red in her displeasure. She might even raise a hand, or even a leg at the offending person.

When her mother asked her to go up to her brother’s room to wake him up, she thought that she had fielded a great opportunity to obtain more information. That phone call from Suizenji confirmed her suspicions that

something was up with her brother, and that something had nothing to do with aliens or ghosts.

What on earth was that ‘important mission’ that Suizenji was talking about?

“Stu—pid jerk!”

After saying that and leaving her brother’s room, Yuuko had gone back to her own room, but her ears were pricked. As she listened to her brother’s footsteps running along the corridor to the washroom, she made up her mind.

Walking softly on her toes, she re-entered her brother’s room without his permission.

Her heart was beating wildly.

Like a police officer inspecting a crime scene, she swiftly scanned the room. She wondered where he was in such a hurry to go to. His alarm clock had rolled to a corner of the room, *manga* and novels lay scattered around his pillow, but Yuuko, with a jolt, realized there was a single magazine in the pile.

A porn magazine, perhaps?

It wasn’t. It turned out to be a town guide to Sonohara Town, the kind that was sold in convenience stores. It was lying face down, open at a particular page, and Yuuko picked it up and turned it over. On the ‘Movie Information’ page was a line that was circled in red with a ballpoint pen:

Teikokuza Movie Theatre, *Mukidō Musume* [The Reckless Maiden]: 10:30 – 12:15

It can’t be, she thought.

Yuuko threw that notion straight out of the window.

That brother of hers will never attempt something as large as this.

She found something else that was of interest around his pillow: a Japanese dictionary that could be used as a fermentation weight. She remembered now, it was a dictionary that their father had bought when he entered middle school. It was out of its case and lying flung out across the bedding.

He might have been using it as a cure for insomnia.

However, it would have been difficult to hold up such a large dictionary while lying on one's back. Yuuko started to leaf through the pages while holding on to the thick cover of the dictionary.

Since Yuuko wasn't seriously looking for anything, it was simply her good fortune that allowed her to stumble upon it. If Asaba had stuffed it between pages nearer to the end of the dictionary, she might never have noticed it. Hidden between pages 140 and 141, at the page marking the end of all words starting with the 'a' sound and the start of words starting with the 'i' sound, was a slip of paper.

It was a photocopied form, folded twice.

Yuuko unfolded the heavily creased slip of paper to find that it was a Club Application Form. The person who filed this application was called Iriya Kana, and the club she wanted to join was the Journalism Club, and her reason for wanting to join was—

The notion she threw out of the window came flying back, along with jaw-dropping evidence.

But, what was this supposed to mean?

Her panicked thoughts raced about her head like a scream echoing around a room. She didn't understand what was going on. Since the Journalism Club was a guerrilla student group, an application form like this won't mean a thing. Although the line for the teacher-in-charge's seal had a stamp that said 'Shiina', there was no teacher in the school of the name Shi—

Wait. Shiina-sensei from the infirmary? But why?

Above all, the question that grated on her nerves the most was, who on earth was this Iriya Kana? There was only one female member in the Journalism Club, someone in the same class as her brother, called something Akiho.

—just maybe.

Her brother had finally gone soft in the head. Perhaps he had spent too much time under Suizenji's influence and finally became someone who would get lost in wild fancies. Perhaps her brother had filled in this form himself and 'Iriya Kana' was, in her brother's mind, the only member of the fair sex in a group of

five super-humans that would restore peace to this Earth.

“Naoyuki!”

That would be more probable, Yuuko thought.

“If you’re going out, spin the barber pole in front for me, won’t you!”

Her brother would disappear any moment now. If she were to make that decision, she would have to make it now.

What will her brother do today? What will become of her brother today?

She wanted to know, no matter what.

Her brother was flying along at a breakneck pace on his bicycle, and it was really hard to keep up with him.

That aside, it wasn’t very difficult to tail him at all. Her brother didn’t look to his side nor look back as he worked the pedals, so he might not have noticed her even if she was right behind him. Anyway, even if she were to lose sight of him, she could lie in wait for him at the Teikokuza Movie Theatre as she could expect him to be there at 10:30 AM. However, she could not be absolutely sure that he would turn up, thus she thought it would be better to be tailing him from the start till the end.

There Asaba Yuuko stood, riveted to the spot, as she came face-to-face with the reality that she had found extremely hard to accept.

In front of Sonohara Bus Terminal, her brother met with a girl.

The girl was wearing the school’s uniform. She had long hair, but that was all she could make out. One reason for this was because Yuuko was somewhere rather far away. She was observing them from the underpass exit’s shadow, and there was about a pool’s length between her and them.

Another reason why her eyes couldn’t take in anything else was because something rather unbelievable was happening between them at that very moment.

Upon seeing Asaba, that girl, of all the things she could have done, burst into tears. Her brother then ran over to her and offered her a handkerchief in a bid to comfort her. Both of them were standing at the platform and the sight of her

brother circling her awkwardly while she hung her head with his handkerchief pressed to her mouth was attracting a fair bit of attention from around them. She couldn't tell for sure without taking a closer look, but she wondered if that girl was crying in such a way that was particularly attention-grabbing.

Her head was spinning.

The situation that she was so sure her brother wouldn't get into was taking place right in front of her eyes.

Yuuko came out of the underpass exit onto the pavement and slowly started walking along the roundabout towards Bus Platform 8.

She thought if she didn't go close enough for them to see her face clearly, they would never know she was there, but, just in case, she pretended to look at shop windows while looking at them from the corner of her eye. Her brother had been fretting over her just now, but he seemed to have calmed down somewhat. Perhaps that girl had stopped crying.

Yuuko wondered if that girl was that 'Iriya Kana' in question.

She couldn't be sure about anything yet, so she decided to call that girl 'the girl who cries a lot' for now.

Yuuko turned and risked a glance at 'the girl who cries a lot' for a few seconds. She must be from Sonohara Middle School given the uniform she was wearing, but Yuuko had never seen this girl before.

The girl was pretty, too.

At least, Yuuko did not have any recollection of such a person amongst the first-years, and the girl didn't look like she was in her senior year. Does that mean she was, like her brother, a sophomore?

Then again, her uniform.

Why was she wearing her school uniform on a Sunday?

She didn't think there would be anyone who would wear their school uniform to a date.

Perhaps she had been too hasty and had jumped to conclusions. It was possible that this wasn't the romantic situation she had been imagining.

Perhaps 'the girl who cries a lot' was simply a new member of the Journalism Club, in other words, Suizenji's new underling, and they were going to some place to collect information for an article which required her to be dressed neatly in her uniform. Perhaps her brother was an assistant or someone who was showing her the way to that place, which was why he needn't be in his. That would also explain Suizenji's phone call this morning. Besides, even if her brother circled something in red on a town guide, it didn't mean that he had planned to go there today.

The problem was, they could very well be on a date, and the argument would still hold.

Her brother and that girl started moving and Yuuko thought she should follow them. There were many people coming and going so she was able to tail them closely. 'The girl who cries a lot' was carrying a black, rectangular bag, probably made of nylon, with many zippers on it. It looked rather heavy, and even though it had a shoulder strap, the girl had chosen to carry it in her left hand. Yuuko thought the bag looked like one of those bags that thieves and spies used to hold their tools, and that it didn't seem suitable for a girl on a date.

As she walked, 'the girl who cries a lot' looked curiously all around her like everything was a rare sight to her, and she didn't look like she was crying just a few moments ago. She would frequently stop to take a closer look at something. Yuuko wouldn't have found it strange if it was to peek into the shop windows. However, the girl showed interest in everything; a child passing her by, posters on a telegraph pole, signboards with a slightly unusual shape. Despite this, the girl did not seem like the talkative sort. Yuuko could tell, just by looking on from behind them, that her brother was trying his best to fill the silence by talking about this and that.

She decided that 'the girl who cries a lot' shall be called 'the girl who looks around' instead.

From the direction they were heading, Yuuko concluded that they were going to Teikokuza Movie Theatre after all.

Just one more turn and they would be able to see the signboard in front of the movie theatre.

It was then that ‘the girl who looks around’ stopped in her tracks, like she had suddenly recalled something important she had yet to do. She spun around to look behind her, and Yuuko was completely caught unaware.

Their eyes met.

In a trice, Yuuko threw herself into the *pachinko* parlor right next to where she was standing.

—did she see me?

Yuuko tried to assure herself that it would be fine, since it’s not like her brother had seen her. However, her hiding place wasn’t a very a good one. The front of the shop was made entirely out of glass, thus if she didn’t go all the way to the back of the shop to hide, she would still be in plain view to someone on the streets. ‘The girl who looks around’ might come back with her brother to find out who she was, but Yuuko was afraid of venturing any further into the parlor. The parlor was modern and tidy-looking, but the inside of the parlor was noisy and clamorous, and the adults who sat in front of the machines looked, to Yuuko, like bank robbers or kidnappers. Her father did not go to *pachinko* parlors, so Yuuko was of the opinion that the adults who did were all hoodlums.

“Oi.”

She jumped up in fright.

“What are you doing here?”

It was someone staffing the parlor. He looked like a university student, and he also looked like he was completely unaccustomed to the black uniform he was wearing.

“Are you hiding from someone?”

Yuuko hadn’t quite recovered from the shock she got from being spotted by ‘the girl who looks around’, so she couldn’t get her brain to come up with a workable excuse on the spot.

“Would you go out of the shop for me to see if those two people on your right are still there?”

The parlor staff knitted his brows. “Ah?” He said.



His tone frightened her, so she instinctively lowered her head as she begged him, “Please.”

With a bewildered look on his face, the parlor staff asked, “—which two?”

“Middle school students, a boy and a girl. The boy is wearing jeans and a T-shirt, and the girl is in her school uniform.”

The parlor staff stared at Yuuko for a short while before running his eyes along the entire length of the parlor to ensure that his boss wasn’t around. Stepping onto the welcome mat at front of the automatic sliding doors, he stuck half his face outside the parlor and peered to his right.

“—are they still there?” Yuuko asked as she leaned towards him.

The parlor staff whispered, “The girl is on the phone.”

With his gaze still fixed on something on his right, he waved Yuuko over. Yuuko timidly went over to him and attempted to look outside from between his legs, as he was of a considerable height, but he suddenly jerked his head back into the parlor and pushed Yuuko’s head down with a rather large hand.

“Wait. The boy is looking this way.”

About ten seconds later, he peeped outside again, and Yuuko did the same.

“That one, right?”

Just below his chin, Yuuko nodded, once. ‘The girl who looks around’ was in telephone box about 10 meters away from the pachinko parlor with her back turned. Her brother looked bored.

She decided that ‘the girl who cries a lot’ should be called ‘the girl on the phone’.

“Who are they? Are they bullying you?”

If she were to give him an honest explanation, it would be a very long explanation indeed.

“No. No, but I can’t be seen by them. For certain reasons.”

Mmf, the parlor staff grunted.

“—but, that’s really strange,” he muttered.

“What is?”

“That phone over there breaks down rather often. Just now, I tried to call a friend using that phone but that phone swallowed my card. I was pretty pissed off then... Maybe it’s been fixed already.”

Mmf, whispered Yuuko.

“Ah, we have a phone like that in our school. There are three public telephones in front of our main entrance, and the one on the extreme right always breaks down too. Gii, who is from my class, said that they do it on purpose and that it was some ploy by the telcos.”

‘The girl on the phone’ placed the receiver back on its hook and left the telephone box. She then walked off quickly, with her brother at her side.

Yuuko probably could continue tailing them without any problems.

“I need to go.”

The parlor staff simply said, “Oh-kay.”

“Thank you,” said Yuuko, as she ran out of the parlor. Spinning around in a little dance, she bowed once before speeding off again. It seemed that there were adults in *pachinko* parlors who weren’t hoodlums, after all.

Weaving through the crowd, Yuuko made a quick turn and came out to the widest street in the route she had taken today but her brother and that girl were nowhere to be found. The signboard was already right in front of her, and if they were heading this way then there was no doubt that their destination was the movie theatre. She tried to figure out what time it was but cursed herself upon realizing that she had forgotten her watch. Even so, she guessed that it would have already been 10:30 AM and that she couldn’t see them because they were in a hurry to be in time for their movie.

Yuuko decided that she should hurry, too. She looked up to the signboard as she ran past it. *Mukidō Musume* [The Reckless Maiden] was being shown in the West Theatre, and its movie poster was an action scene depicting a hoard of young people fighting with each other. It didn’t look like a very wise choice for a date.

Even though it was a Sunday, there weren't very many movie-goers in the theatre. A number of ladies somewhere between middle-aged and elderly, with age spots all over their cheeks, sat in the waiting area in front of the ticketing counter, dozing off.

Yuuko paused for a second to take deep breaths and wipe the sweat from her brow, before running to the ticketing counter.

On the other side of the reinforced clear plastic panels was a clock so old that one would think they dug it out from ruins dating back to the *Jōmon* period. The clock needles pointed to 10:32 AM.

And like two voices singing in harmony:

"One middle school student ticket!"

Both of them recognized each other's voice.

Both of them, while still leaning over the counter, turned to face each other.

"Oh, Asaba-kun! What a coincidence!"

It was Suizenji.

He received confirmation over wireless radio.

"It appears that," Enomoto said, "there is a huge conspiracy underway here, and it had nothing to do with us whatsoever." He looked like he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Perhaps it was a situation we could have foreseen." Shiina Mayumi pointed out. "After all, weren't you the one who told me that there was a two-person team monitoring Apron Number 4 from halfway up the Tonoyama Mountains during summer vacation? Those two were Asaba-kun and Suizenji-kun, right?"

"But ya know, the 'kun' suffix doesn't suit Suizenji at all. Doesn't he look around twenty-eight? The cheek of him to go 'one middle school student ticket' while looking like that! If I were the person at the ticketing counter I would definitely not believe that he was still in middle school."

"How mean. He might secretly mind, you know."

Enomoto scratched his head vigorously, and flakes of dandruff fell off his

scalp. Truth is, he hadn't showered in three days.

"—naw. It's half a compliment, actually. He's smart enough to outsmart twenty-eight-year olds nowadays if they aren't careful. I heard that Suizenji wrote 'CIA' on his career questionnaire and had the entire staff room thrown into disarray. CIA isn't someplace great to work at anyway, he should have just given up on it."

"At least CIA is a little better than where we are now. When it comes to career counseling, you have to respect the students' wishes, don't you? Oh, by the way,"

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you remove them? When those two set up camp in the Tonoyama Mountains."

Enomoto looked at her like he was staring down at an inferior living thing.

"You women are all the same."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How can you be so tactless? It's a secret base deep in the mountains we're talking about, you know. Spending the entire summer keeping watch on the mysterious Sonohara Air Base, going to the nearby fields to steal watermelons, throwing firecrackers at cars with couples having a wild time in them, and giving food to wild badgers... Their schedule was jam-packed with activities like these."

"T-Those two were doing things like that?"

"I really wished they'd let me join in the fun. I have to admit, I couldn't quite hold myself back and was ready to go join them sometime near the start of August, but that idiot Kimura stopped me from going."

"...I'm fine being a woman, then. And an idiot, to boot."

Shiina Mayumi's face turned serious once again.

"Nevertheless, wasn't it risky? Suizenji-kun can be sharp at times, and Apron Number 4 isn't in a condition to be watched right now. What would you have done if they had taken photos or videos?"

“There were no slip-ups on our part regarding that. Anyway, what did you think that Ticonderoga-class aircraft carrier was doing off the coast at the promontory, at that time?”

“—h-hang on. What?”

“Ah, but around the end of July, just once did a missile carrier make an emergency landing at the Number 4. It was very early in the morning, and it didn’t seem like they noticed.”

“You called an aircraft carrier over just for those two?!”

“Yeah, that I did. And we moved the entire Manta fleet over there.”

“Are you an idiot?! You must be out of your mind!!”

“—but, ya know.”

Perhaps the Sandman had decided to pay him another visit; Enomoto’s voice had lost its strength. He leaned back on his seat and closed his eyes.

“At that time, the Skunks were saying that they wanted to run tests on the Torch. If those two hadn’t been in the Tonoyama Mountains then, we might have turned that request down—anyway, it’s true that there was such a discussion at that time.”

“What is this ‘Torch’ that you speak of?”

Enomoto opened his eyes into slits.

“What was its official name again? I can’t remember. It was some sort of navigation device that allowed the Manta to land on the aircraft carrier from extreme altitudes. It was an improved version or a new model or a bug fix or something like that. The only thing I remember rather clearly was that it was some shit that I didn’t need to remember.”

“The Skunks have been working on nothing else but that lately.”

“But yet again, they were the ones who created the Manta.”

“I really pity Kana-chan. She made a really good guinea pig, didn’t she?”

Enomoto let out a thin sigh, and Mayumi Shiina could almost hear, in that sigh, him saying to her: “What are you saying now, after all this time?”

The voice over the wireless transceiver introduced itself: “Kajiwara here,” and Enomoto sat up like he had been whipped.

“What is it?” He said.

“—erm, you did say to contact you if things got steamy between them, so.”

Right, I did say something like that just now, Enomoto thought. Hearing of Asaba Yuuko’s and Suizenji Kunihiro’s forced intrusion had put him in a rather playful mood just now. It must be the high from sleep deprivation, he decided.

However, there was a glint of excitement in Shiina Mayumi’s eye. Snatching the wireless transceiver from Enomoto,

“What do you mean by ‘steamy’?”

“Er, you know, if she rests her head on his shoulders and—”

“Can I go in?”

Shiina could hear Kajiwara’s wry laughter over the transceiver.

“—you could, I guess. I could get them to secure the west-facing back door.”

Watching Shiina Mayumi gleefully removing her seatbelt, Enomoto simply said:

“Don’t.”

“Why not?”

“If they see you, you’ll put the kibosh on our plans.”

“It’ll be okay!”

“Even if no one else notices you, Iriya will.”

“But, don’t you wanna look?”

Enomoto was a picture of extreme weariness as he remained on his back against the car seat. After a short pause,

“I wanna look.”

<sup>1</sup> Sortie: military dispatch or deployment: Wikipedia link [here](#)

## (Part 3)

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She was dragged into the theatre, half against her will.

On top of that, Asaba Yuuko, in her hurry to leave the house, had forgotten to bring out with her one other thing aside from her watch.

Her wallet.

For this reason, Suizenji had paid for her ticket. She wasn't sure what he was thinking, but he also bought her a pamphlet, some cola, and a bag of popcorn. She asked him what he was up to, and Suizenji had replied with a giggle that it was to be part of the disguise.

She was now sitting on a seat near the back and on the left side of a nearly empty theatre, in a rather petulant mood. Sitting on her right was Suizenji. The screen had finished showing a news report of the state of affairs in the North and the movie had started rolling, but Suizenji did not so much as glance at the screen. Instead, he whipped out a small pair of binoculars and focused his attention on the back of two heads sitting near the center of the theatre.

Well... she did make the mistake of showing up at the ticketing counter the same time as Suizenji did.

This blunder of hers might ruin her chances of getting married, thought Yuuko.

What's with his 'what a coincidence'? She was sure Suizenji was involved in planning the events of today. He must have known, from the very beginning, that her brother and 'the girl on the phone' will be going to the Teikokuza Movie Theatre and that they will watch the 10:30 AM screening of the movie, hence was lying in wait for them near the ticketing counter. And, just as he predicted, they had appeared with Yuuko following close behind.

"—hey."

"Hm?" Suizenji answered, with the binoculars still raised to his eyes.

"How much do you know?" Yuuko whispered.



“Let’s do an exchange of information and not hide anything from each other. We shall start with you,” Suizenji whispered back.

“Why me?”

“That’s because you’ll have less information than I do. It’ll be quicker if you shared whatever you have first.”

In a peevish tone, Yuuko replied, “—my brother had been acting strangely since last night, so I looked through his things. I found a magazine with a red circle on it and a Club Application Form filled in by an Iriya Kana. I then followed him and saw him meet ‘the girl who cries a lot’ at the bus terminal in front of the train station. ‘The girl who cries a lot’ was crying at that time. After that, she turned into ‘the girl who looks around’, and after that she became ‘the girl on the phone.’ I reached this movie theatre only a few moments before meeting you. That’s all I know.”

Suizenji lowered his binoculars and turned to look at Yuuko.

“Just to make sure, the girl whom you call ‘the girl blah blah blah’ refers to Special Correspondent Iriya, does it not?”

Looking past the darkness that separated them, Yuuko pointed a finger at the girl sitting on her brother’s left.

“That’s her? That’s Iriya Kana?”

“You’re speaking too loudly.”

Yuuko gulped. She slid down lower in her seat and instinctively looked across to the center of the theatre where the two were sitting.

“Your information interests me greatly. This is the first time I have heard of Special Correspondent Iriya filling in a Club Application Form. I am also very surprised to hear that Special Correspondent Iriya had been crying, as it is rather hard to believe that she would.”

“It’s your turn now.”

A crease suddenly appeared in Suizenji’s brow. He once again lifted the binoculars to his eyes and leaned forward.

“Hey, it’s your turn.”

“Hush.”

“That ain’t being fair!”

“They’re talking now.”

He held one ear bud from his earphones to her and Yuuko realized for the first time that he had the other one in his ear the entire time. The other end of the cable disappeared into his bag.

Yuuko stuffed the ear bud into her ears.

She couldn’t hear anything, but it didn’t sound like the earphones were switched off. It was like being on the phone, except that the person on the other end was not speaking.

“What’s this?”

“Live coverage.”

Just then, her brother’s voice could be heard clearly over the earphones.

“—are you sleepy?”

Yuuko saw the head beside her brother’s shake from side to side.

Suizenji shot Yuuko a brief wide-eyed glance, a grin tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Before his date, Special Correspondent Asaba and I held a top-secret meeting at the diner Shimizu to come up with a strategic plan. The magazine which you found in Special Correspondent Asaba’s room was one of our sources of information during that meeting. However, that meeting had another important purpose: I needed to install a tiny wireless microphone onto one of his belongings.”

“Does my brother—”

“Of course he doesn’t know.”

Such a horrible thing to do, Yuuko thought. What did he take other people’s dates for?

She could hear her brother saying to her:

“—if you’re sleepy, go ahead and sleep.”

The head beside her brother’s shook firmly from side to side, but shortly after, it started to sway like a person rowing a boat as she nodded off. Eventually, her head drooped to her chest and there it remained, without moving an inch. Slowly, like a magnet, her head started to tilt towards her brother.

“Oh!” exclaimed Suizenji.

Yuuko could only watch with a slack jaw. Iriya, who looked like she was fast asleep, had rested her head against her brother. She could only see the back of their heads and couldn’t know for sure, but it looked like her entire body was leaning against her brother’s, too.

Suizenji balled his fists, and, like a second firing off instructions to his boxer from the corner of the boxing ring, said in a low voice:

“Special Correspondent Asaba! You have to kiss her here! You have to kiss her, for the sake of our future!”

Yet, her brother’s head did not move.

A long time seemed to pass by. Yuuko stared at the back of her brother’s head, feeling like she was being tossed about by huge waves of an emotion that she couldn’t put a name to. A terrible struggle must be taking place within her brother now and she knew that he would no longer have eyes or ears for the movie that was playing. However—

Will her brother kiss her?

Or will he not?

Does she want her brother to kiss her?

Or did she not want her brother to?

Just then, she heard the sound of the door opening quietly. Light streamed in from outside and the inside of the theatre became just a little brighter before becoming dark again as the door closed. Yuuko turned to look. The two people who had just entered the theatre took their seats in the back row on the extreme right of the theatre. Yuuko couldn’t see how their faces looked nor

could she make out their features in the darkness.

—yet, she had a vague feeling that something was off.

The first thing she found strange was that they were both fully grown adults. This movie, if anything, was intended for young viewers, with the few movie-goers in the theatre looking like they were from middle school or high school. Furthermore, it was two adults on a date. She wondered if two adults on a date would choose to watch a movie like this.

The second thing she found strange was where they had chosen to sit. As the theatre was rather empty, many good seats in the middle section were still free. The couple had no good reason to choose to sit right at the edge of the theatre.

Well, she and Suizenji were also sitting at a corner of the theatre, but that was because they weren't here to watch the movie. They had some other deep, dark reason to be there...

Which means that couple might have one too.

Perhaps the two of them intended to use the darkness of the theatre as a cover to do naughty things to each other, or something along those lines.

“Kya~~~!”

Shiina Mayumi exclaimed in pure delight, in a voice that was barely loud enough for Enomoto to hear. As if that was not outrageous enough, she also dared to jab a finger discretely in their direction as she continued speaking:

“Aw~~~ They all over each other, aren't theyyyy~~~!”

“Be quiet. Don't swing your feet. Act like you don't know anything.”

“But just look at that~~~! I have never seen Kana-chan act that way before~~~~!”

“...Hey, maybe she really is asleep.”

“You think so too?” said Mayumi Shiina. Her voice had abruptly regained its usual composure.

Enomoto gave her a small nod. “I can't imagine her being able to manage something quite as coquettish as *that*. She just doesn't know how to,” he said,

flatly.

“—well, they seem to be doing fine. They look like they’re getting along with each other very well indeed.”

“More importantly though, why on earth is Asaba still watching the movie?”

“What’s wrong with watching a movie at a movie theatre?”

“Don’t be stupid. The movie is always of secondary importance. Why else would a boy go through all that trouble to invite a girl to somewhere as empty and dark as a theatre like this?”

“Ehhh, I’m sure you’re wrong about that. It’s probably only a coincidence that not many people came to catch this movie at this timing. Asaba-kun isn’t that shrewd a person to plan something like this beforehand.”

“Naw, I won’t allow him to worm his way out of this one. I don’t care if it was a coincidence or not, but it isn’t every day that a girl offers herself up to you, ya know. Go Asaba, go! At least give her a kiss, knock her out with a kiss!”

“I don’t think that’s possible for Asaba-kun. But then again, it’s nice to be young, isn’t it? Once Asaba-kun overcomes that first bloom of youth he wouldn’t care less if he was on a train, or a park... Oh, but look how innocent he is now!”

Enomoto let out a sigh, his shoulders sagging dejectedly. He gazed up at the dark ceiling of the theatre. “—I guess. I probably have no right to criticize him. I remember being like him too, once.”

“Onee-san here hates liars, you know.”

“I ain’t bluffing.”

“Shall I let you in on something really interesting? All your victims from General Affairs, Accounting, and Public Relations intend to come together to form a plaintiff group to file a suit against you. I can’t wait to see the courts put you on the death row. You’ll be the first person in the world to be sentenced to death for sexual harassment.”

“Did you honestly think that Kimura, or whoever it was, was serious when they told you that? In any case, I was once like Asaba, when I was his age.”

“I don’t think so. Not you, at least.”

“When was the first time you kissed a man?”

Hidden by the darkness of the theatre, Mayumi Shiina flushed red. It was rather difficult to tell when the only light in the room illuminating their faces was from the screen that was so far away.

“It doesn’t matter when I did, does it?”

“Fine, you don’t need to tell me when you did, but I’m confident that mine came a lot later than yours. Look here, I will never forget when I kissed a girl for the first time, it was...”

“W-Wait. There’s no need to announce it here for the whole world to—”

“—in the autumn of my twenty-sixth year.”

After a period of inexplicable silence, Shiina Mayumi finally spoke up.

“Mmf,” she snorted. “I heard what you said that time, you know. We drank with everyone on the day we successfully got Iriya transferred into the school, didn’t we? Weren’t you boasting about being popular with the ladies even when you were young?”

“Why would you remember something like that? Anyway, I wasn’t lying when I said that. I *was* popular with the girls.”

“Chief Justice, Your Honor... The defendant is making lame excuses... He’s trying to hide the crimes he had committed in the past by making contradictory statements...”

“Well, I got confessed to a good couple of times and even received love letters from girls from other schools. I ignored all of them. Even if I didn’t ignore them, I most definitely did not go on a date with any of them. At that time, I told myself that it would look uncool to be seen flirting with girls— as if I really thought so, too! That was simply an excuse; the truth was that I didn’t have the balls to date any one of them.”

Shiina Mayumi, with a suitably suspicious look, continued:

“—balls? Why would you need them? Shouldn’t it be alright, since the other person has already confessed to you?”

“I was probably just being overly self-conscious. I grew up in the rural countryside, after all. All you needed to do was walk home with a girl; rumors would spawn and your friends will poke fun at you about it the next day. It doesn’t sound all that bad, but I hated it, which made me really annoyed when someone confessed to me. She’ll cry if I turn her down, too. Oh, by the way, turning all those girls down like that made me even more popular, for some strange reason. The girls would go, oh, Enomoto is different from all the other shy boys! I wonder who it is that he really likes! Man, you got to be shitting me. I harbored so many perverted fantasies at that age that I swear I could have burst.”

People often adopt a cheerful tone as they speak of their tragic events in their past. There was a smile on Enomoto’s lips as he spoke of his.

“It wasn’t as if no girl caught my eye at that time, ya know. But, when I turned around in the classroom to look at the girl who I did like, I would find her comforting the girl I turned down during lunch break. Then again, I would never have found the guts to confess to her. Meanwhile, some other guy will come by and sweep her off her feet. I agonized over it for quite a while, you know. I wondered why things kept turning out that way, and why things like that kept happening to me. After going through several vicious cycles, the conclusion I reached was that I should become a person that was ‘so cool and flamboyant’ that women will find really hard to get close to me and barricade myself in a bulwark of my own shitty pride. This was when my twisted personality was at its most extreme. I couldn’t undo the curse I placed on myself, not until I went to university.”

“Where’s that?”

“Some public university in my hometown. My folks said they’d pay my tuition fees if I went there.”

“And? Which goddess appeared before you to save you from yourself?”

“Ohhh, she was so adorable.”

—who, from where, and what was her name?

Those questions were already on the tip of her tongue, but Shiina Mayumi swallowed them. Enomoto had not revealed any names or anything tangible to

her thus far. In other words, he was probably telling the truth when he mentioned that he was a university student with a certain complex.

Things were different for him now. Enomoto could well be the most dangerous man in the whole of Asia right now. Many people, both inside and outside of the country, were keeping tabs on him. On the other hand, she was someone who was far closer to the ‘front line’ than Enomoto was. If she knew the name of the woman who used to be with Enomoto and she landed in the hands of the enemy somewhere, they might inject a truth serum into her. Then, a woman whose maiden name was Komatsu Yukiko, who is married with two kids and living happily in a house on Kamishiro Avenue 3-65-2 in the Yahata Precinct of the Imperial Capital would open her fridge to make preparations for dinner and 4 kilograms worth of plastic explosive C-4 in her vegetable box might detonate. In this industry, you never know what might happen. Even more so in recent times.

“University was really different from middle school and high school. It was as if your class was now open to everyone in the country, surrounding you with unfamiliar faces. I felt like I was born again, ya know? I started talking to the girl who sat next to me at a foundation seminar, we started saying that we should go out sometime, and I went on my very first date with a girl. I racked my brains like mad trying to think of a place to bring her to that would make her happy, but I knew that my hometown didn’t have very many good dating spots, and I didn’t have a car, too. Well, even now I still have no idea what I was thinking then, but I was probably insane. I brought her to the place I frequented the most at that time.”

“And where was that?”

“A fishing pond.”

“F-Fish...”

“To fish for white crucian carp.”

“Huh.”

“Surprisingly, she seemed to like it. At first, she didn’t even want to touch the fish bait, but by the time we were done we had succeeded in reeling in two wrasses and she was beside herself with joy. We went home stinking of



chrysalis powder, and, on the way home, she told me that she would definitely want to do this again. She may or may not have thought of it as a date, but I did, and if not for that success, I wouldn't be standing here now."

A short silence followed as the two of them watched the movie.

"—so? You shared your first kiss with her in autumn when you were twenty-six?"

"No, that's another story."

"Hey. Why are we having this conversation again?"

"You started it, didn't you? We see Asaba getting cold feet and I said I knew how he felt but you didn't believe me at all. Look here, when it comes to girls, the path I walked is one covered in blood. And yet I say, go forth Asaba! Knock her out!"

Just then, on the screen which wasn't very wide, the protagonist of the show, Miyamoto Kyouko, let out a scream. Through the worn out speakers, the scream morphed into something that didn't sound quite human as it reverberated across all four corners of the dark theatre.

Iriya's head twitched. She then pulled away from Asaba's shoulder, almost leaping backward in her hurry.

"Look at that. She woke up."

*I told you so*, Enomoto seemed to say as he leaned back in his chair. Iriya must be looking down, as her head was now hidden by the back of her seat. Asaba was speaking to her, earnestly.

"I wonder what he's saying."

"He should just tell her that he was so captivated by the sight of her sleeping face that he forgot to watch the movie," said Enomoto, with a chortle. He seemed to be in hurry to prove the fact that he was blind to his own faults.

"—right."

There was a black bag at Enomoto's feet. He pulled it up onto his lap, quietly unzipping it and underdoing its flap. He started pulling things out of it, one after the other. A portable wireless transceiver. A laptop. Connecting cables. Two

earphones.

“Wait. What are you planning to start?”

“Look without turning your head. Suizenji is sitting at our ten o’clock, three rows from the back and two seats from the left, right?”

“Ah,” Shiina Mayumi made a short, small sound of surprise. She was so enraptured by the sight of Iriya sticking so closely to Asaba that she had completely forgotten about Suizenji.

“—right. And that tiny little girl sitting beside him is Yuuko-chan, then?”

“She only looks small because Suizenji is beside her. She should be almost as tall as Asaba.”

Enomoto was busily moving his hands. He stuck the earbuds into his ears, connected the wireless transceiver to the laptop with the cable and launched the tuning tool on the laptop.

“Do you remember Kajiwara saying that Asaba was emitting strange radio waves?”

“When you heard him say that, you told me not to bother about it, didn’t you?”

“That’s because it’ll be rude to interfere. Suizenji probably planted a microphone on Asaba’s bag or something so that he could listen in on their conversations. Since he went through so much trouble to do that, we should just... tune in.”

He already knew which frequency to tune into as Kajiwara had already informed him of that frequency in his report. It was UHF 398.605. Wireless microphones that were sold in the market usually utilized the same six channels, with UHF 398.605 being one of them. He had expected Suizenji to come up with something more elaborate, but he knew Suizenji probably had to make do with something off-the-shelf as he had no time between today and yesterday to make large-scale preparations. Enomoto couldn’t help but grin as he thought about how Suizenji must have stayed up all night, too.

He could hear Asaba very clearly through his earphones.

—e-erm, you often take naps during lessons too don't you, Iriya?

“Well but of c—”

“Me too me too, I want to listen too!”

Just as Enomoto held out one ear bud to her, Suizenji suddenly got up from his seat, causing both Enomoto and Shiina Mayumi to immediately look down. Suizenji disappeared behind a door with a sign that said ‘TOILET’, but returned to his seat shortly after.

Her brother was talking to her.

—do you have a part-time job, or something? One with a shift that ends really late at night? Ah, erm. It's really okay. Our school doesn't allow us to take up part-time jobs but I know quite a few people who do, still.

Yuuko stared intently at her brother's head, who had rested his chin on the backrest of the seat in front of him, as she absentmindedly listened to his voice. Suizenji returned from the washroom. Since she was blocking the way to his seat, she thought about answering, “like hell I would” if he asked her to move out of his way, but he plopped onto the seat on her left instead.

Enomoto made his decision swiftly.

“Let's get out of here. Suizenji knows we're here.”

“Eh? Ah, wait.”

Enomoto pulled the earbuds out of his ears and hurriedly tried to close his laptop, but was interrupted by Shiina Mayumi.

“W-Wait, what's wrong?”

“Suizenji changed his seat. He was sitting on the right of Asaba's little sister, but after he came back from the washroom he sat on her left, instead.”

“—so?”

“It's weird. People don't usually do things like that. I don't like it.”

“Asaba-kun. Hand me the bag on the seat next to you.”

Yuuko ignored him.

“Asaba-kun,”

“Get it yourself.”

“Just give it to me, quickly. Do your best to look as nonchalant as you can.”

Yuuko was slightly taken aback. Nevertheless, she leaned sideways to grab the strap of his bag, acting like it was a huge bother to do so. However, the bag was so heavy that she was unable to lift it up with one hand. Since her feet didn't even touch the ground, it was hard to look nonchalant as she struggled to hand the bag to Suizenji.

“What's in it?”

“A wireless transceiver, a spare wireless transceiver, a palmtop computer, a CCD camera, a voice recorder with a memory card, a microphone amplifier, night vision goggles, an infrared projector, seven modified all-purpose lithium batteries, and, uh I can't remember what else.”

Suizenji slid deeper into his seat and slowly started to move his hands. He opened his bag, took out the palmtop computer and connected it to the wireless transceiver.

“You're overthinking things. How does him switching seats lead to us being discovered?”

“He might be up to something. If he's sitting on the left of Asaba's little sister, he becomes harder to see from where we are now.”

“And what do you think he might be doing, hiding in Yuuko-chan's shadow?”

“Like hell I would know. It might be too late once we find out. Even if we haven't been discovered, we've stayed here for far too long. We should seize the opportunity to leave now.”

“Wait a little longer, for about five minutes more, just five alright? Kana-chan just woke up and we finally get to hear them talking, after all. It's your job to listen to them too, isn't it?”

“There was something weird going on here since last night.”

Suizenji had laid the palmtop computer discretely on his lap, his fingers tapping away furiously on the tiny keyboard on it.

“There have been strange encoded signals flying all over the place in the vicinity. The signals were scrambled, originating from multiple sources on the move despite not being very strong. There didn’t seem to be too many of them in the beginning, and the signals stopped transmitting at around 7 AM. Then, I started to pick some up every now and then at around 9 AM but 10 AM was when traffic experienced a surge. 10 AM was when our two Special Correspondents Asaba and Iriya had agreed to meet.”

Yuuko knitted her brows.

“—so?” she asked.

“It would seem like we aren’t the only ones who are monitoring our two Special Correspondents.”

“But.”

It could all be a coincidence. It could simply be fans of that genre who were completely unrelated to them, fooling about with wireless encoded signals. It just so happened that their conversation started to get really busy at 10 AM.

“One more thing. When I was out with Special Correspondent Asaba in the mountains during our summer vacation, there were several instances when we managed to intercept signals that resemble these. Unfortunately, it appears that there was a team watching us at that time. Now a similar group of people with the same equipment are following Special Correspondent Asaba and Iriya around.”

What’s that supposed to mean? Where in this universe can you find people who have such strange hobbies as your—

“Ah.”

There were two suspicious looking people in the room.

The couple who came to see this movie despite being fully grown adults, who chose to sit right at the corner of the theatre.

“R-Right, now that you mention it—”

“Don’t look.”

Yuuko was about to turn to her four o’clock to look, but she froze at Suizenji’s

sharp whisper. Suizenji's fingers had stilled, and he threw Yuuko a fleeting sideward glance with a grin on his face.

"So you noticed, too. You're a promising young one aren't you, Asaba Yuuko-kun? Please, by all means, join my club. Wait, if you do join us we'll have two 'Special Correspondent Asaba's. What should I do?"

"What are *you* going to do?"

"Big Brother and Little Sister seem to be in bad taste. What do you think about Nao Nao and Yū Yū? Isn't it cute to have names that sound like pandas?"

"No! I wasn't talking about that, I mean, what if those two at the back—"

*Were really sent here to keep an eye on us? What do you intend to do about it?*

"I'll blow their cover."

He didn't sound like he was joking.

"If those two really are who we think they are, we can assume they know who we are and that they know we've planted a microphone in Asaba's bag. I pretended to go to the washroom just now to take a brief look at them; one of them seems to be busily working on something he had pulled out of his bag. He's probably using his own wireless transceiver to intercept signals from our microphone. They wouldn't draw too much attention to themselves if they just listen in anyway, and they probably wouldn't have let this chance slip by. This is where we come in."

Suizenji stuffed a hand into his bag and switched off the wireless transceiver he had been using for the microphone. Yuuko heard a beep through her headphones before they went silent.

"I'm going to burn out their receiver by blasting a high output signal in the channel that my microphone was tuned into. They should hear a frightfully loud noise via their earphones, and their circuitry might spark like a fireworks display. If they jump up in surprise it'll be a dead giveaway. Okay, Yū Yū? Your job is to keep a sharp eye on everyone else in this theatre. I would like you to check if there was anyone else who jumped up other than those two behind. That, and our withdrawal and backup protocol. Once it starts, throw everything

into my bag and make your escape via that door. Let's meet again in a café on the other side of the road. If you wait more than thirty minutes and I still haven't shown up, tell Special Correspondent Asaba that I have hidden a letter at 'our usual place'. Do you have any questions?"

"—stop calling me Yū Yū."

"Roger that."

"I think both Onii-chan and the girl will notice if we make a big commotion."

"I guess they would. I don't care if they were to notice the commotion behind them, but it'll be bad if they were alerted to the fact that we are here. Move to keep your identity hidden."

"You can't just keep telling me that I should do this and I should do that. That wouldn't be fair. What would *you* be doing, then?"

"That goes without saying."

In the darkness of the theatre, Suizenji laughed, dauntlessly. He took out a small camera equipped with a flash and autofocus. He proceeded to check on its battery and whether he had remembered to load it with film.

Then, he slid his hand through the armband on the camera, which had 'Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper' written on it.

After a long while, Iriya nodded in affirmation. Her face was still red.

Such a long time had passed that Asaba couldn't immediately recall what he had asked her.

"Ah. Erm."

*Right, part-time job.*

"I see, so you've been working part-time. What kind of work is it?"

What did he want to do with this information? It was obviously so that he could take a job at the same place. He didn't care if the shift ended late at night. He didn't even care about how much the pay was. It was not as if he needed the money in the first place.

"It's a part-time job at the base," Iriya answered.

Her facial expression was extremely stiff, but Asaba wasn't looking at her. Asaba didn't have the balls to look a girl in the eye at point-blank range when talking to them in the first place. Instead, Asaba was thinking of things that were completely unrelated to the point at hand. He wondered if he was too talkative, if he was creating trouble for other people by talking, oh, wait, there was no one around him anyway...

—a job at the base.

Asaba's thoughts were still off point, but it was now focused on something else. Suizenji's face had popped into his head.

"Is it a job that I can do, too?"

He was certain that it was not Suizenji that he was asking her this for.

"You can't."

Iriya's answer came straightaway.

"You definitely can't."

It became a little awkward after that.

Naturally, Asaba did not know why Iriya had spoken so firmly, and because he didn't know, what she said made him feel minuscule. Asaba was at a loss for words as he began to wonder if he had said something that got on Iriya's nerves. Since he had lost all courage to continue the conversation, he fell silent. This time, it was Iriya who felt suffocated by the silence.

She looked at Asaba at the corner of her eye, bit down on her lip, and started to wring her hands in her lap.

Iriya was trying to say something.

The scene on the screen switched to show a scene at night, and the theatre grew even darker than before.

It was as though someone had timed it perfectly. At that very moment, a woman's scream rose up from behind Asaba and Iriya.

It wasn't the scream of terror one often heard in horror movies, but a scream of surprise upon being confronted with something that one completely did not



expect. It wasn't a cry that sounded very distressed, nor was it very loud. The truth is, only about half of the few movie-goers in the theatre actually turned back to look at once, Asaba and Iriya not included. Those who turned back to look did not expect to see anything interesting. After all, they thought it would probably some ugly bitch who got her boobs groped by a dirty old man or some clumsy fellow who spilled coke on his lap.

However, those who turned back managed to see something quite startling.

The first thing they saw was darkness. The next thing they saw was the light from the window of the projection room shining onto the screen.

In the darkness, they also saw a man.

And a woman.

Both had risen from their seats. The man grabbed the woman's hand and dragged her along behind him as both of them tried to flee the theatre via the door on the left.

There was a second man.

He was large and imposing, about six feet tall. In his hand was something that was around the size of a blackboard duster, and he was making a mad dash towards the fleeing duo, eagerly stepping over empty seats as he went.

Actually, there was also a second woman there, too. To be more specific, it was a 'girl', rather than a 'woman'. She was hugging a heavy-looking bag to her chest as she rushed out of the door on the right at the back of the theatre, almost falling over in her hurry to leave. Not everyone noticed her, however. The sight of the second man, whose reckless actions made him look like a soldier charging into battle, would render most people unable to take in anything else.

His clamorous footsteps finally made everyone in the theatre look behind.

The second man, however, was extremely fleet-footed. By the time Asaba and Iriya caught sight of him, he already had his prey right in front of him. While still in midair halfway through a jump over the backmost row of seats, he raised the blackboard duster to his face like he was taking aim at the duo that was trying to flee the scene from the door.

He was holding a camera.

A series of flashes pierced through the darkness of the theatre, one after the other.

It was a timing that must have been difficult to grasp. The duo he was targeting was already out of the door, and he had pressed the shutter in quick succession in a stance that wasn't exactly very stable. Did he manage to pull it off? Did he manage to catch the duo on film? Even he himself would not be sure at the time.

Everything took place against the light from the projector.

The consecutive flashes from the camera momentarily blinded all movie-goers in the theatre as their eyes were already accustomed to the darkness. There were no exceptions.

Asaba had reflexively closed his eyes against the flash, and, when he opened them again, all performers involved in the incident had left the stage. The theatre was as dark as ever, with dust specks glittering in the light streaming in from the window of the projection room.

Only the door on the left at the back of the theatre swayed, ever so slightly.

“W-What was that, just now?”

He looked at Iriya.

Iriya tilted her head slightly, as if to say that she didn't know either. The theatre was abuzz, and the murmur of voices in the theatre grew louder.

Someone said, “I smell something burning.”

Then, the projector stopped projecting images and light flooded the theatre.

## Chapter 4 – Since This Is How Things Are (Bangaihen)

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Barely ten minutes had passed since she started unpacking when the newspaper seller came by. He had the toe of his safety boot wedged between the door and the doorframe, with the door chain still in place, spouting one ingratiating sentence after the other.

“I’ll throw in some detergent,” he beseeched her. “I’ll throw in some beer discount coupons as well. Just one month will do! What about I just give you a month’s worth of these for free? Our business is such that each salesman gets a little bonus every time he closes fifty contracts. Since you’ll be my fiftieth contract, it’ll still be a plus for me even if I paid for this out of my own pocket. You’ll get all of these without needing to pay for it, I get a bonus, and my performance record at work will improve! Everyone will be happy! Okay? I beg you, please!”

She would very much have wanted him to leave.

Sticking the metal bat back into her umbrella stand, she retreated into her room that spanned six tatami mats to breathe in the scent of fresh, brand new tatami mats, but she still couldn’t quell her anger.

—oh, for fuck’s sake.

Every newspaper door-to-door salesman sang the same tune. I will throw this and that in for you if you would so kindly take custody of these troublesome things, they always went, almost pressing the papers into her hands as they pleaded with her.

The very least a salesperson could do when trying to promote their wares was to speak of their good points, but those salesmen only did things like brandish stuff like detergent and beer discount coupons or whatever it is they had in her face without so much as a mention of how good the newspaper they were selling was. It was fairly obvious that the salesmen were of the opinion that what they were selling were ‘just’ newspapers. She felt like they were pressing on her something they felt had too little worth to bother making

recommendations for to her, a customer, and she found that very disagreeable indeed. On top of all that, they didn't even try to be affable. They were simply persistent, and, depending on the situation, they might try to threaten her into accepting their wares simply because she was a woman.

She wondered who it was that said it: In Japan, the intelligentsia wrote newspaper articles, but those who sold newspapers were low-level gangsters or hoodlums.

Shiina Mayumi scanned the room and let out a sigh. All around her were cardboard boxes, scattered all over the room.

“—I guess that's okay.”

As long as she had a place to sleep, that is. At least for now, she had one.

She could do the unpacking tomorrow instead.

Shiina Mayumi picked up the plastic bag from the convenience store that she had flung into a corner of the room and then promptly forgot about. Three cans of beer lay sweating inside the bag. She took one out and stuck the other two cans along with the bag into her refrigerator, which was still empty.

The melody of '*Tōki Yama ni Hi wa Ochite* [The Sun Sets in the Mountains Far Away]' began to play from a public announcement speaker somewhere in the distance. Over it, a monotonous female voice that sounded like someone reading an essay out loud started to make multiple echoes down the streets. *It's already seven, so be careful on the road on the way home. When you reach home, remember to do your homework, help out around the house, take a bath, brush your teeth, and sleep early*, it droned.

—mind your own business.

The glass door didn't have any curtains, but she opened them wide and stepped out onto the veranda while still barefoot.

Before she knew it, her days were becoming longer. From the veranda of Room 202 in Fukuhara Manor, one could see the deep colors of sunset in the sky. One could also look out at the row of shabby-looking houses and look down at a tiny park which wasn't large enough to be designated as a place of refuge in times of war. A wind ruffled past her, her white tank top clinging to her body,

which was moist with sweat.

She pulled the tab off the can.

A bitter laugh escaped her lips despite herself. She had just moved into a room six tatami mats large, her things are in cardboard boxes which she hadn't unpacked, and she was on a veranda, watching the summer sunset. What is this, a playing card combination<sup>1</sup>? It was a scene straight out of an uncreative beer commercial.

She took a sip.

On the last day of June, in other words, three days later, she would be taking up a new post as a school nurse at Sonohara Middle School. Most people usually got sent to the 'front line' much earlier than this, but due to the indecisiveness of the higher-ups in US Air Force and the Japanese Air Self-Defense Force's desire to butt into their affairs, she was posted out behind schedule. She was to gather detailed information after assuming her new position, but summer vacation came almost immediately and she didn't have much time to do so. After summer vacation ended, 'Alice' was also posted to the 'front line', and she was put on the backup team.

She took another sip and finally remembered.

That she had forgotten to call the base to report that she was now in the safe house.

After yet another sip of beer, she went back to her room with the glass door still wide open.

Sitting with legs crossed on the floor, she pulled the phone towards her.

The phone started ringing, just then.

*Shit.* She hasn't contacted them for quite a while, so someone from the base may have started to fret and decided to call her up to lecture her, she thought. Hurriedly taking up the receiver in her hands—

"Oi, turn your TV on, your TV!"

It was Enomoto.

"W-What's this, out of the blue? Hey. Is Sakisaka with you now?"

“Put that aside and turn your TV on now, would you! A super interesting program is on right now!”

The first three electrical appliances Shiina Mayumi plugged in when she got to her new place was her refrigerator, her phone, and her television. Her 17-inch television sat atop a cardboard box right beside her, but the remote was somewhere else, mixed in amongst her stuff.

She leaned forward and pressed the power button on the television.

“Which channel?”

“26!” Enomoto yelled in reply, before bursting into a loud guffaw.

Really? Was it that funny?

Shiina Mayumi pressed the channel change button repeatedly until the number on the top right corner of the screen read ‘26’. An extreme close-up shot of a middle-aged man with a beard and a bald head appeared on the screen. He was highly agitated and in the middle of an impassioned speech.

“Since that is how things are! Since that is how things are! Since that is how things are, you all are unable to truly see anything! Your eyes are clouded by the tinted glasses of what you all call ‘common sense’! Look here, we already have that many eyewitnesses, you know. Amongst them are elementary school students, Buddhist monks, and even policemen! Do you think that an elementary school student would be able to get a lie past a scientist or a journalist? What on earth would a monk or a policeman gain by risking their reputation and their place in society to spout rubbish? There can only be one explanation! They’re all speaking the truth!”

“Since that is how things are! Since that is how things are!”

On the other end of the line, Enomoto chanted in tandem with the man on the television before bursting into laughter again.

She had seen that man before.

That repeated utterance of “Since that is how things are!” sounded familiar, too.

She couldn’t place the name, though. She thought it was Aoi something, but

maybe she got that wrong as well. In any case, it was a name that sounded like a pen name an overly self-conscious middle school student would choose when handing in an entry to a poetry competition.

He was a researcher that dealt extensively with the paranormal and appeared frequently on shows such as these.

The camera switched angles to show a middle-aged lady, who launched a counterattack.

“You’re being rude when you speak of elementary school students that way. You shouldn’t look down on them. There are tons of elementary school students who can deceive adults. That being said, any kid out there could say “the Earth is oblong” to someone like you and you would still believe him. That’s because you wanted to believe that the Earth was oblong from the very start. The same goes for the monk and the policeman. Saying this might hurt your feelings as you seem to be awfully lacking in worldliness, but could I say it, still? Could I? There are people in this world who would say, or do anything, no matter how senseless, just so they could gain attention from others. It’s sad, but there are lots of people like that. They don’t even mind dying if they could be acknowledged by others. Such sad, sad creatures we humans are.”

She had a hairstyle like a *galea*, a Roman soldier’s war helmet and a mole so large it looked like she had a chocolate chip stuck on her chin.

Shiina Mayumi had seen her before too.

She couldn’t remember the lady’s name, but she was someone who always made an appearance on shows such as these. She carried the title of ‘Science Journalist’ and wrote columns in several conservative magazines. At least, that was what she thought.

Through the receiver, “Mannn, that is gross. That hairstyle is gross.” Enomoto sounded like he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

On the U-shaped conference table sat three polemicists from each camp. Someone had put together a set that was almost as gaudy as a *pachinko* parlor behind them. Paper models of Adamski-style UFOs lay around, bathed in a waterfall of smoke.

In other words, today's show was a 'UFO Special'.

Mayumi Shiina felt slightly disappointed. Enomoto had asked her to switch her television on with such great *élan* that she was expecting something very, very interesting indeed, but UFO specials aren't that uncommon, and she usually didn't even feel like watching them.

However.

"A heated exchange has broken out in the studio, but right now we would like to check in on someone who is currently at the Sonohara Air Base! Ōitabashi-san! How is your experiment coming along?"

—!!

The screen switched to show a different location and Shiina Mayumi could identify it at a glance. It was Apron No. 2 at Sonohara Air Base, but the filming was not being done inside the premises. The shaky camera was pointed all around in a broad sweep to show the crowd of civilians and curious onlookers that had gathered around.

"Yes! This is Ōitabashi, and we are at Sonohara Air Base. Presently, my watch reads 7.16 PM, and a little over ten minutes have passed since we began the telepathic UFO summoning experiment. Right now, we can observe that there are no obvious changes in the sky above us, yet look at the number of people that have assembled here! This is what one would expect of Area Sonohara, the UFO Town with a military base in it. Look at how interested the townsfolk are!"

Shiina Mayumi could no longer stay quiet.

"I-Is this live?!"

"Right-o. The people from Security were running all over the place just now and I was wondering what the commotion was all about, and it turned out to be, well, *this*. I wanted to go out there and make a peace sign or something but that idiot Kimura—"

"Aren't you the idiot here instead?! Look, make sure you don't move from where you are, okay?! This is being broadcasted throughout the country, isn't it?! If they manage to even catch a fleeting glimpse of your face on film even a court-martial won't save your ass!"



“Sheesh, there’s no need to yell at me, I was joking. Oh look, look, he’s coming on now! That, what was his name again? Ah anyway, the man who can summon UFOs using his telekinetic powers is coming on now! Whoa, it is still interesting no matter how many times you’ve watched this fellow do this!”

What was being filmed was a man who looked like he subsisted on just plain water, raw vegetables and marijuana. He so tall it was almost creepy. His eyes were closed and his face was tilted upwards. He stood there with his arms held open, elbows bent. Shiina Mayumi remembered him as someone who called himself some sort of ‘Channeller’, and he often appeared on television to do telepathy or prophecy-related performances. Some organization called Brothers from Outer Space or something like that conferred to him a special title which he goes by, a lengthy, tedious-sounding name which Mayumi Shiina tried to recall but couldn’t.

“Eh, according to Canrinaflakymam Freycorte Shia-san<sup>2</sup> here, it takes around thirty to forty minutes to summon a UFO, and, if a UFO were to appear, it would come from N-N-E direction, 30 degrees east of north.”

“Bulls-eye heading 030, huh. He’s not completely off the mark.” Enomoto muttered.

“As you can see, it would take a while for something to happen. We will get in touch with you immediately if we see anything, but let’s return to the studio for now!”

Clouds appeared in the sky as dusk deepened to dark as night started to close into the room. The six-tatami matted room had no light fixtures, which made it half-dark inside.

Light from the television screen flickered across her face as Shiina Mayumi sat there watching it, almost in a daze. She laid the receiver on the tatami, picked up the can of beer beside her and gulped all of its contents down. Throwing herself on her back, she reached out her right arm to extract a lighter and pack of cigarettes, which she hardly smoked, from the messy pile of items she had stuffed in her bag. She then lighted her cigarette, the flame glowing red in the half-darkness.

Drawing up a knee and sitting up, she picked up the receiver once more.

“—it’s really alright, you say?”

“I guess so. We’ve contacted the mothership. Plus, those fellows are only outside Apron No.2 because our guys from the Third Section expertly led them there.”

Shiina Mayumi sighed while exhaling a cloud of smoke, flicking the ash off her cigarette into the empty can of beer. On the screen, Bearded Baldy was jabbing a finger at a dashboard and fervently trying to talk his audience around. On the dashboard was an artist’s impression of a ‘Foo Fighter’ which some people say they’ve witnessed around Sonohara Air Base.

From the receiver came a bubble of laughter.

“We don’t have that. We don’t have anything that in the house. That’s, without a doubt, a UFO. Twenty points!”

Shiina Mayumi laughed dryly too.

The UFO that was shown on the dashboard was more or less how George Adamski imagined them to look like, with all its more outlandish features removed.

“Look at this semi-circular portion,” Bearded Baldy explained. “This is where the so-called ‘Dean Drive’ is housed. It produces some sort of anti-gravity field, and it is believed that all UFOs witnessed thus far was equipped with a propulsion device like this.”

“He got the name right! Twenty-five points,” the receiver chirped.

“Of course he would get the name right. We named it after that, didn’t we?”

Chocolate Chip shook her head from side to side as if to say that she could hardly take his shit anymore. “Anti-gravity. Aaanti-gravity. Force acting in the opposite direction of gravity? With all due respect, did you mean to say, ‘anti-gravity’, just now?”

To which Bearded Baldy retorted, “I did. What of it?”

Chocolate Chip took a sip of water from her cup before saying, “And which scientific principle is your, so called, ‘anti-gravity field’ formulated from or based on?”

Bearded Baldy replied, "My apologies. You'll have to ask the aliens."

The receiver went, "Sorry man. You'll have to ask the Skunks."

"You have no idea, and yet you dare to speak so shamelessly of 'built-in anti-gravity equipment'?!"

"Then, pray explain to me how the UFOs come to a complete standstill in mid-air or fly around in zigzag patterns!"

"That's why I've been saying, from the very beginning, over and over and over and over again that those UFO accounts were either visual misjudgments, figments of someone's imagination, or just downright falsehoods!"

"Since that is how things are! Since that is how things are!"

Both camps started to throw things at each other.

"What this person's name again?"

"Which person?"

"Mister since-that-is-how-things-are."

"Aoi Seien. I've spoken to him twice, you know."

Her breath hitched in her throat.

"Don't worry. In both instances, there were guys from the Third Section with me. This fellow often loiters around the base, so the Third Section guys said they had him marked and have been following him around for quite a while. I met him in the waiting room of a place where they were filming something."

"So, is he really as nutty as they say?"

"No, not at all. If I put it kindly, I would say he was a professional, but, if I put it unkindly I would say that he's a sly old fox."

"—what's that supposed to mean?"

"We put him through a little test. I showed him a photograph and said something along the lines of 'Sir, this is a photo a friend of mine took and I would really like you to take a look at it.' He knew that it was fake at a glance. Said, 'I'm so sorry to tell you that this is a typical 'glass work' photo.'"

“What’s ‘glass work’?”

“It’s a certain method of taking bogus photographs of UFOs. You stick a paper cut-out in the shape of an ellipse onto a glass window and set your focus to ‘infinity’ on your camera. It’s the most common trick that people use.”

“You mean, you could take genuine looking photographs just by doing something like that?”

“Oh, you’d be surprised if you saw the better ones around. Anyway, when I acted all concerned and went, ‘Harh, is that so?’ he said, ‘Would you let me borrow this? I would like to use it for the show.’ The show he was going to do that day was a panel discussion similar to today’s TV special. During the discussion, he triumphantly pulled out my photo while saying, ‘A certain person has submitted to me conclusive evidence of the existence of UFOs!’ The cheek of him! Then, when the opposing camp said, ‘How is one photograph conclusive proof?’ it was ‘Since that is how things are! Since that is how things are!’ all over again.”

In the half-darkness, the column of ash on her cigarette had grown rather long.

“It’s not just him. Mishima Satoko, that’s the name of the middle-aged lady on the show just now, yes? Her title of ‘Science Journalist’ is not a bluff, but, truth is, she’s also very much the entertainer from a production firm. On that day, she too appeared on the show to cross swords with this baldy. But, when the cameras stopped rolling during the interval, she appeared to be on friendly terms with him and they were talking to each other about their pets. Apparently, they hit it off after finding out that both of them kept Somali cats. They were going on about which brand of pet food was good, and which pet hotel was good...”

Some ash fell from her cigarette.

“In a certain sense, you could say that both of them actually lack worldliness—I guess?”

Those were the same words that Chocolate Chip had taunted Bearded Baldy with.

“Have you ever thought that most naïve of them all might actually be, well, us?”

The only light illuminating Shiina Mayumi’s form in the half-lit room was the television screen.

“—and we would like to invite contestants for the next episode of this show. Please check the telephone number to make sure you haven’t called the wrong one! Let us now show you the entries that our viewers have faxed to us.”

“—it wouldn’t be too good for us if someone managed to take a picture of your face, but.”

Light from the screen flickered across Shiina Mayumi’s face as she managed a thin smile.

“If it’s just for a bit, why don’t you try going out there and get yourself on camera? You could make peace signs with both hands, like a kid.”

“Nah, I won’t. I’d look stupid.”

“This is an entry from a Kawaguchi-san, a school teacher who lives in Sonohara Town—I am watching your show right now. The UFO phenomenon could be the largest collective fantasy that humans have ever thought up. As there are still many people out there who believe in things that do not exist, I hope you will come up with TV programs that appeal to reason and show logical restraint, so that these people may be educated.”

From somewhere out of the camera’s frame, an AD stuck in an arm to hand the anchorwoman a document.

“Uhhh, yes. We have received yet another fax from someone living in Sonohara Town. It is entitled ‘Top Secret Information’, and it says here that a large trailer that is being guarded by armored vehicles have arrived at Gate No. 2, south of Sonohara Air Base, and it is carrying—erm.”

A troubled expression appeared on the anchorwoman’s face as she directed her gaze to someone off the camera, like she was seeking for instructions.

“The trailer is carrying four frozen alien cadavers—or so this says. Erm, this was a fax from someone from the Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper.”

The receiver muttered, “—oh shit.”

On the screen, Bearded Baldy looked overjoyed to hear the news. He was calling for the team of reporters on-site to rush down at once. The studio was filled with the tense atmosphere of the impending unplanned live broadcast, and the mic in the studio began to pick up the orders that were being barked to the crew. The program host had his eyes on the sub-monitor as he asked, uh, could we get through to Ōitabashi-san at the Sonohara Air Base right now?

“Look at what happened!! That was why I told Kimura that idiot to ship that here by air freight instead!!”

“Wait, what’s going on?! Don’t tell me,”

*That there really were alien carcasses on that trailer?*

“Of course not!! He planned this, knowing that if he wrote something like that the filming crew would take action!! It’s not as if Suizenji knew what was on that trailer, he simply intended to throw the reporters at us to find out!! Sakisaka!!”

“Hey, who’s Suizenji? Wait!”

Enomoto did not reply, but she could hear a chorus of loud, angry voices flying back and forth in the background.

“Sorry! It’s going to get busy real soon so I’m hanging up now!!”

He slammed the phone down and the line was cut off.

Mayumi Shiina had no idea what was going on.

After that, the show entered a commercial break.

There was nothing Mayumi Shiina could do except to lean towards the screen as she stared at it.

However, the commercial break lasted more than fifteen minutes. In her impatience, Shiina Mayumi thought of giving her television a good shake.

Then, “This is Ōitabashi! Eh, we are now at the freight terminal in front of the Sonohara Air Base, Gate No. 2. Would you look at that please, as per that tip-off, a large trailer that is being protected by armored vehicles is now parked

here! It appears to me that this is a transfer of cargo from the trailer to another truck. The number plate on that truck seems to be of a different format. Please look over there, the soldiers are now in the midst of unloading metal shipping containers from the trailer! Cameras, over here!”

The scene was in chaos.

The cameras were shaking so violently that one would think there was an earthquake taking place. Members of the crew were running here and there while the onlookers who had reached the scene were creating a ruckus at the gate. Ōitabashi-san, with his back to the camera, broke into a run with the cameras chasing after him. He was heading towards where an enormous military trailer and a truck that was used for transporting goods around the base was parked. Although there were guard soldiers trying to hold the onlookers and film crew back, they seemed terribly outnumbered. The ‘Channeller’ with the horribly long name was nowhere to be seen, at least on camera. Perhaps everyone had left him behind at Apron No. 2.

“Excuse me! Please show us the inside of this shipping container!!”

Breaking free of a guard soldier, Ōitabashi-san threw himself at one of the shipping containers. Lunging at the few soldiers who were unloading it with the ferocity of someone taking a swing at them—

“Oi you, what are you trying to do? It’s dangerous, so keep away! Keep away, I say!!”

“What’s so dangerous about your cargo?! Is there something inside that you cannot show our viewers?!”

“The container may collapse on you so get away immediately, you moron! Heyyy all you bastards!!”

It was almost like a riot. One by one, the people started climbing onto the shipping containers and the truck rocked on its suspension. Finally, one of the containers tumbled off the trailer’s load-tray and onto the road. In the shock of the impact, its lock came undone. As the container rolled down the asphalt slope, several human-shaped things spilled out.

They were life-sized, inflatable sex dolls.

And this was being broadcasted live for the whole country to see.

Someone's hand covered the camera lens and the screen switched to a display that said:

"Please give us a moment."

In the half-lit room six tatami mats large, the phone rang.

Shiina Mayumi, who had her eyes fixed on the screen of her television, slowly reached out her left hand to pick up her phone receiver.

"—hello."

She could hear Enomoto's sigh from the other end of the line.

"Hey. Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"—did your efforts pay off? Or is this the end for you because you were too late?"

After a short silence, Enomoto snorted in laughter.

"—what do you think?"



—it, it's rough being in the army, isn't it?

—I-I guess so. They have to go on dispatch missions to many different places, after all.

That was what they concluded in the end, wrapping up the TV special with both camps coming to some sort of reconciliation.

By then, night had permeated the six-tatami-large room. A sunblock lotion commercial was playing on the television that was left on and the cardboard boxes in the room were faintly awash with the color of the sea.

"A school nurse in the infirmary, huh," Shiina Mayumi muttered.

She had plopped herself down cross-legged on the veranda. In her left hand was a second can of beer, and her right arm was curled around a metal bat she had rested against her shoulder.



A slack wind was blowing at her as she sipped her beer while looking out at the early summer night sky. Venus was out in the sky. It was a rather troublesome planet that humans often mistook for a UFO both back then, and even now.

She tightened her grip around the metal bat and readied it in a stance to strike.

Up till now, she had moved countless times for all sorts of missions.

And she would be assailed by newspaper sellers in the midst of her unpacking every time she did. Shiina Mayumi, with this very bat, had emerged victorious every time. She had never lost a fight with it, not even once. That was why she had unwittingly picked up the habit of pulling out the bat from a box and assuming an offensive stance at her front door whenever she reached a new place before doing anything else.

“Sonohara Radio Wave Newspaper, huh,” Shiina Mayumi muttered with the bat held high above her. As she looked up at the summer night sky, she thought to herself.

Perhaps the next newspaper seller she met might be a slightly more formidable opponent than the ones that came before.

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### Translation Notes:

<sup>1</sup> *Yaku*: a playing card combination in a *Koi-koi* game using *Hanafuda* playing cards: Wikipedia link [here](#)

<sup>2</sup> カンリナフレキマム・フルエコルテ・シアー, *kanrinafutureki furuekorute shiaa*, or whatever this weirdo’s name was supposed to be... We can only imagine how it is meant to be spelled.

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